

## Biographical Outline of Charles William Wonacott

Submitted to Inyo County GenWeb and the BUHS Faculty and Staff Project by Carol Braley Backert.

Born: November 8, 1849, probably in Newbern, Virginia.

Died: November 14, 1929 in San Luis Obispo, California

Buried: In family plot, Pioneer Cemetery, Bishop, Inyo County, California.

Charles Wonacott's family lived in Virginia since prior to 1750. As a young child he and his family moved to Illinois, where they lived around the Sangamon River, in Virginia City, Jacksonville, Zion City, Chandlerville and Decatur. It appears the family spent the time of the Civil War in Illinois and after the war moved for a short time to Kansas and then on to Missouri. The best indication is that they left Illinois about 1869 when Charles was about 20. His older brother, George Washington Wonacott took a soldier's claim to a farm near what is now Pittsburg, Kansas, but left it to move to Osceola, Missouri, and it was there that Charles married Rachael Letitia Huckaby on June 16, 1872, at Ritche's Mill. They lived in Osage, Missouri where their first child, Franklin was born. The family of the Huckaby's, the Smiths and Charles formed a party and left Ft. Scott, Kansas on May 2, 1874 on the long trip across the prairie to California. This portion is best told in the history titled "The Wonacott Family", by Kathleen Wonacott.

The father of Charles William Wonacott was Kennerly Buckingham Wonacott. The mother of Charles William was Margaret Bell, she married Kennerly Feb.27, 1844, in Virginia, the same day as her brother Crockett Bell married Kennerly's sister Elizabeth Little is known of her excepting that she was the first of the four wives of Kennerly Wonacott and the mother of the first eight of his fourteen children. She gave birth to John, George, Mary, Charles, Sarah, Peyton, Nancy and Margaret. She was born in either Virginia or Tennessee about 1825, Married Kennerly Feb.27, 1844 and their first child was born in 1844. In his history Charles Newton Wonacott tells of two brothers that married two sisters (actually a brother and a sister married a brother and a sister). This created the situation where the children were double cousins and he says they would be closer related than brother and sister. That is true, the children of Margaret Bell and Kennerly Wonacott were always close to the Bells, especially John Newton Bell, throughout all of their lives.

On May 19, 1900 a farmer and rancher named Jim Butler found samples of rich ore in the desert where Tonopah is now located, he took the samples back with him to his ranch, got his hay in for the winter at the ranch, and on Aug. 25, 1900 located the first mining claim at what was to be the town of Tonopah, one of the great mining booms of Nevada history.

In the spring of 1901 the rush began, mines were opening and a town began to form. A

row of shacks and tent houses were erected along what is now the main street, the Mizpah Hotel was a tent, sanitary facilities were constructed, with a shovel, if at all, and the law was the same six shooter that was used to settle the west. By August 1901 the population of Tonopah was approaching 900, there was a newspaper, several saloons, dance halls and the town was booming.

By August 1901 Charley Wonacott and his partner George Hall were in the contracting business in Tonopah. By January, 1902 they were in the undertaking business and from that day until November of 1912 all death certificates for Nye County (Tonopah) were signed either by Charles Wonacott or George Hall, after 1912. Charley became partners with Frank J. Cavanaugh until 1920 at which time he released his half interest in the business, including the funeral parlor, hearse and piano to Mary Cavanaugh, Frank's daughter, for the grand sum of \$10.00. For all deaths that occurred in Tonopah the certificates were either signed by Charles Wonacott, George Hall or Frank Cavanaugh until 1935, which is probably the time that Frank died. Charles was County Coroner of Nye County and signed death certificates for other undertakers in that capacity. For instance, it is known that during all of 1901 there was an undertaking firm of Sawle and Hollis operating in Tonopah, but there are no death certificates signed with their name.

The Wonacott family history states that Charles had a taxi service in Tonopah, it is known that he freighted lumber into town, had a contracting business, was a busy undertaker and then in February of 1903 he purchased the Eclipse Restaurant And Dance Hall on Summit Street for the sum of \$519.14. In September of 1903 he purchased the Union Dance Hall on Corona Avenue. He made a total of nineteen property transactions in Tonopah that are on the records. There must have been more because he bought property that there is no record of him ever selling. It is known that he had a sawmill on the Owens River and a ranch in Bishop. It would be fair to say that he was an active man, not one to waste his time.

No story of Charles Wonacott and his family would be complete without some of the history of Bishop. His children were raised there and each of them always felt that Bishop was home and it had a special place in their hearts as long as they lived.

Settlement didn't begin in the Owens Valley until the 1860's, so it was a new community just being settled when the Huckaby's and Wonacott's arrived there. There were some parties through the southern part, the Manly Party in 1849 through Death Valley, Captain Joe Walker in 1833 was the first white man known for sure to come through the Owens Valley. Before him Jedediah Smith had traversed eastern California and perhaps came through the valley. Fremont named the Valley after one of his men, who never saw it, this on his trip of 1845. Jedediah Smith is said to have discovered gold in Mono in 1825, more than 20 years before Marshall picked up those nuggets at Coloma that started the gold rush. Cord Norst, a miner, rediscovered gold in Mono Gulch in 1859 and that was the beginning of settlement in the Mono-Inyo area. Prior to 1861 prospecting had been the main purpose of the immigrants, but in 1861 the McGee's and Summers

drove cattle into the Valley, and Henry Vansickle and A. Van Fleet came to the Valley and settled. Van Fleet built, at what is now Laws, the first white man's habitation, he cut some wild hay, the first harvest of any kind. Samuel Bishop came in 1861 and gave his name to Bishop Creek, and hence the town. It wasn't long until battles with the Indians began and they continued off and on through 1866 when hostilities in the Valley pretty well ended. The first structure in Bishop proper was a blacksmith shop near where West Line and Main Streets are today; it was put up in 1864. In 1866 the County of Inyo was formed. By 1875 mail and stages left the county six times a week for Aurora. The seventies are spoken of as the "Lawless Years", and that they were. Two sheriffs were killed while performing their duties during this time, and brawling, knifing, and the Colt spoke louder than the Law of the County. It was during this time that the Huckaby's and the Wonacott's came to the Valley to make a new home. This was a land for pioneers, a new land, a land of opportunities, but not a place for the weak or faint of heart, but they were neither.

Going to Bishop in the hot summer days, before air conditioning in cars, required a long hot trip through the desert, but when approaching Bishop, the first indication that relief was nearing would be the smell of new mown hay. That sweet smell hung over the town, not like the smog over cities today, it was pleasant, refreshing and foretold of things yet to come, of cool irrigation ditches for swimming, of green pastures and green trees that were a relief to the eye after a day spent in the desert, of seeing aunts, uncles and cousins, of feeling the excitement the grownups felt at coming home. There were farms with horses, cows, haystacks that had mice in them to kill, there was milking to be done. There was an uncle that would let a little guy hold the reins and drive the team for a way. That would make any boy proud, proud that they could do such a thing, and proud that his uncle trusted him to do it. Of course, in latter years, it would dawn on you that the horses knew where they were going and didn't really need any help from you. But it was too late to destroy the image, it had been planted, it had done its job.

All the aunts and uncles are gone, the ranch on Dixon Lane is sagebrush excepting for the old silo that stands, a mute monument to a place; a place that will never be a home to anyone again.

What happened to Bishop and why the ranches that were once green and fruitful are now nothing but desert is the story of man's quest for that most precious of things, water. He must have it, and he will have it, and Los Angeles through their Metropolitan Water District did take it. How they took it is a bitter part of California history. There was dynamiting of the aqueduct, dead horses were put into it, and the Alabama gates were opened and the water let spill into the desert by a group of armed men that defied the authorities. Taking the water took the lifeblood of the Valley. But Los Angeles did buy some of the land, and then let the ranches go back to desert. They didn't pay fair prices just took the water, then when there was no water they paid the ranchers distressed prices. They did pay for some of the businesses in town. For instance they paid A.O. Adams, the husband of Hattie Wonacott, for his business, home, equipment and

furnishings the sum of \$34,515.50. Was it a fair price? Probably, if you wanted to sell your means of livelihood, leave the place where you were born, see your family scattered and settle in a new place. (A. O. Adams and Hattie went to Pismo and built the New Adams Motel).

The fact that there was so much bitterness, that the Legislature of the State Of California did vote to censure the City Of Los Angeles (the only such vote in its history). It was so well publicized in the state that Will Rodgers found cause to say that Los Angeles felt they needed more water to put into their orange juice. It was, and remains, a dark time in the history of the " City Of The Angels".

There are many books written on the subject, among the best are; W.A. Chalfant's, The Story Of Inyo. And Remi A. Nadeau's, The Water Seekers. They are interesting stories and recommended reading.

Family History of Forrest X Backert, written November 8, 1978