

Biographical Outline of Rachael Lettitia (Huckaby) Wonacott

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



Born Sept. 12, 1856, in Cass County, Ill. Died Feb. 1, 1922. In Bishop, Calif. Buried, Pioneer Cemetery, Bishop. In the Wonacott plot.

The Huckaby family has been traced back in Virginia to about 1720. This work done by Dennis Huckaby, a grandson of George Washington Huckaby, who is currently living in Scottsdale, Arizona. The Virginia Huckaby's are probably related to other Huckaby's that research has turned up in Georgia and Louisiana, there are several spelling variations, but no direct connection has been found.

Our Huckaby family, or at least parts of it, left Virginia sometime after 1800 and went to Tennessee. It looks as if they spent the Civil War there. Hiram Huckaby, the father of Rachel was born there in Campbell County in 1817 or 1813. He was married there in 1859. The Civil War began in 1861 and ended in 1865.

From Tennessee the family moved to Illinois and from there to Missouri for a short time. On April 10, 1874 they left Independence, Missouri for California. There was a total of seventy-five in the party, it included Hiram Huckaby, Louvicey Hicks-Huckaby, his wife

and Moses Smith and his wife Saphrona Herrill (Merrill?) Smith, George Washington Huckaby and his new bride Emily Smith. Charles Wonacott and Rachel Huckaby were married on June 16, 1872 in Osceola (Ritches Mill), Missouri so they were newly wed also, they were members of the immigrant train until it got to Laramie, Wyoming where Rachel's first child, Franklin died, and her second child Carrie Belle was born. The main party arrived in Bishop Oct.26, 1874, this according to Dennis (Chuck) Huckaby, but Rachel, her husband Charles, and the new baby Carrie didn't arrive in Bishop until November 1875.

Rachel's third child, Don Lester, was born in Bishop Dec.21, 1876, her fourth child, Albert Warren (Bob), was born in Murphys in 1886. They returned from Murphys to Bishop and Rachel inherited one third of the Huckaby homestead, later the Wonacott ranch on Dixon Lane. She and Charles bought out the other heirs and owned the ranch themselves. When Charles bought out the other Huckaby's he had Rachel quit claim her share to him, including 4 cows and five calves. Don't know why this was done this way, especially in a community property state, but it makes interesting speculation.

Rachel had two brothers, James, who never married and George Washington Huckaby, who married Emily Smith, in Missouri, before coming to California. Emily and George had eleven children: James, Franklin, Charles, Will, Claude, Ray and Raymond the twins, Alice, Ethel, Ella and Florence. Most of them lived in the Laws area and went to school in Laws and Bishop. Emily ran a Hotel in Laws (Dennis Huckaby said he was born in it), Claude had a poolroom and a dance hall there. George and his wife Emily owned several pieces of property there.

There is no town of Laws now, not really. The Railroad Museum is there, which is really something worth any of the family seeing, there is a house or two, a commercial plant, a movie set, you might find some concrete work with the name A. O. Adams imprinted in it. The post office that Florence Huckaby-Smith took care of for so many years has been moved to the museum grounds. But really there is no Laws anymore, no ranches around there; no ditch companies bring water to the fields. When you go there you aren't going to see much of anything and you will probably think that Laws is a pretty desolate place to live, no one would want to make a home there or to raise children there, it is just so much sand and sage brush. Near town is the Owens River, now a kind of brackish looking stream, wouldn't drink the water, for sure. Don't care too much to swim in it anymore. But... there was a time... It was long ago, in the seventies, no,no, the eighteen seventies, not the nineteen seventies, when the Wonacott's and the Huckaby's and the Smiths came to the Valley there was water, and the water made the Valley bloom. It is hard to believe that there were ranches and fields of grain and schools and stores and people with children, and yes, even signs of prosperity in the latter years as a reward for those who weren't afraid to pioneer the land. The clearest example I can give is the old silo on Dixon Lane (it used to be Wonacott Lane). It is easy to find. Go there. There used to be a home there, a barn, out buildings, an orchard, gardens and trees. It was a working ranch. Over on the other side of the ranch (the next road north) was the Riverside School

where many of the Wonacott's and Huckaby's went to school, but now...sage brush, sand, nothing. Doesn't even look like it could have ever been anything. It can't; not without the water... It is gone, Laws is gone. The worst part is that that what is left isn't nice and green or pretty. That all went when the water went. Most of the Owens River now flows in a big steel pipe. Go north of Bishop and on the left or east side of the freeway at the bottom of Sherwin Grade is a road that will take you to the Owens River Gorge, where Charles and Rachel had the saw mill, you can look at that nearly dry gorge and at the same time hear the Owens River rushing by in all its purity... in a big steel pipe.

The people of Owens Valley didn't give up without a fight; they fought for years, in the legislature with bills and in the hills with guns. They appealed to Teddy Roosevelt. They blew the aqueduct several times; they opened the Alabama gates and kept them open by armed force. The battles cost money, and with the businesses closing and the people leaving the Valley for lack of water the costs were too much the bank was judged to be bankrupt. That bankrupted the Charley Wonacott family; he had all his fortune in that bank. The people left. They are gone. There are more Huckaby's in the Pioneer Cemetery than anywhere else in the Valley now. That is part of people, but that part the thirties. There is here, today. The story, a sad part is past. That is history, another part. The part for lots of the story of that is now.

What do you think would have happened to one of the prettiest little valleys in the state if it had lots of water again and Los Angeles didn't own the land and real estate developers could build rows of little ticky-tacky houses and tell the people of the wonders of the climate and of the freedom from the smog? Years ago some wag went up north of Bishop and stuck a sign in the sand proclaiming "Los Angeles City Limits". It is entirely logical that if those farmers could have sold their land to developers and they developed the valley like they did elsewhere, you might not be able to tell where the Los Angeles City limits were. The City Of Laws might be a housing development now, a bunch of condos. Perhaps the sagebrush is better, you could say this is kind of how it looked when they came. But they would have certainly been better off financially. All of us would have been better off.

Rachel was a small woman, not much over five feet tall. On one of the property deeds she made her mark which would indicate that she was illiterate, or that her husband, Charley, was up to some of his hi-jinks. She died of an aneurysm of the arch aorta, she was sixty-five. She had nine children, one of them, Franklin, died when he was two years old, but she raised the remaining eight. Her youngest, Dwight, was twenty-three when she died.

Family History of Forrest X. Backert 11/8/1978