

The Wonacott Family: California Pioneers

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

In November 1849, when the Manly party was on the trail to what is now Death Valley in Inyo County, California, there was born in Virginia, a boy who would later to play a substantial part in developing the northern part of that same county.

Charles Wil1iam Wonacott was born in Richmond, Virginia on November 8. 1849.

Little is known of his boyhood, but on June 16. 1872 in St Clair, Missouri, he married Miss Rachel Huckaby.

They lived for a time in Osage. Missouri and their first child Frank was born. They were not very prosperous in Osage and, tales which came to them of the farmland available in eastern California made them yearn to try their fortune in the new country. So when Rachel's brother George Huckaby was married to Emily Smith, the bride and groom together with their parents the Joseph Smiths and the Hiram Huckaby's and young Charles and Rachel Wonacott all started together for California leaving Fort Scott, Kansas on May 2,1874. In the excitement of packing for her wedding trip, Emily, then only fifteen years of age forgot the hoops for her hoop skirts, which indeed was a tragedy for a young bride.

The journey was difficult, and baby Frank became ill with fever. Besides, Rachel was now expecting her second child, and so the Wonacott's stopped in Laramie, Wyoming while the others pressed on to California. Charles and Rachel stayed for a year or more in Laramie end there their daughter Carrie was born and little Frank died.

Finally they resumed their trip and reached Bishop in November of 1875 or in 1877. (There is a difference of opinion as to the year.) Their first home was a cabin Where the J. C. Penney Store now stands. They moved to a cabin on the old Mallory Ranch and their second son Don L. Wonacott was born there. (Later, the cabin was used to house pigs).

The elder Huckaby's and Smiths eventually settled on adjoining ranches on the north side of' what now is called Dixon Lane. In these early days when the mines were booming there was much hauling to be done from the mining areas.Charles Wonacott spent some time teaming between Candelaria and Carson City and Bishop.

For a while they lived in Murphy's in Calaveras County where he built the steps down to the Mercer Caves, which were discovered by a Mr. Mercer, a relative of the Matlick family. It was during this period, on October 18, 1886 that their son Albert Warren (Bob)

was born.

Charles was a carpenter and a building contractor by trade. His first work in the valley was that of rebuilding in West Bishop the Spencer Store, which was a well-known establishment at one time. He built the West Bishop schoolhouse, and when it was destroyed by fire, he built another to replace it. This structure is now being used as a Presbyterian Church for the Indians. Many of the bridges around this area were built by him, as was the old grammar school, which now houses the Bishop 2 fire department and city offices. He was one of the carpenters for the Butler Home where Edna Butler now resides, and he was a contractor for the old Bulpitt building on the site where Joseph's store is now located, although he himself did not do the stone work on the edifice.

For years the family lived on the ranch on West Bishop Lane where the Clarkson's now reside (usually called the Nelligan ranch). Mr. Wonacott planted in front of the house two little pine trees, which are still there. The Eldred family lived across the street from them there, and the Wonacott and Eldred children were reared together. Don, Forrest and Carrie attended the West Bishop School, which their father had constructed. The Keoughs also were close friends of the Wonacott's. In fact when Mrs. Keoughs passed away, Rachel Wonacott was with her to the end. The two families particularly enjoyed making camping trips together up Bishop Creek. For four or five years they celebrated the 4th of July holiday in this way.

The Wonacott family now moved to the ranch of Rachel's. Parents, the Huckaby's, and when Mr. Huckaby passed away, Charles. Wonacott bought his brother-in-law George Huckaby's inherited share of the ranch, part payment being a team at horses, which was a favorite of the family. There was no school bus in those days, and the Wonacott children walked to school in Bishop and back. One of Carrie's dear friends at school was Eva McGee Yaney. Mamie Clark was Carrie's teacher when Carrie graduated from the 8th grade. She graduated from the Bishop Academy also.

Bob Wonacott attended the Riverside school where Katie Arcularius Watterson was his teacher. This school had several locations, class being held in houses donated for the purpose until Charles Wonacott gave the county an acre of his land to be used for a school as long as it was needed.

A school was built on this site and was used until the attendance was insufficient to maintain it. Florence Huckaby Smith walked all the way from her house in Laws to attend it after she and the teacher at the Laws School had some differences. Grace Patterson Schively, Evelyn Gunter Neill and Mrs. Mabel Amon were others who taught there.

While building was his primary occupation, Charles Wonacott found time to engage in other enterprises and in civic affairs. He, Phil Keough, Dick Eldred and John Bulpitt were the first to stock Ray Lake above Big Pine with trout. They carried the fish up to the lake in cans on the backs of donkeys. He, Charlie Garrison and John Bulpitt started a sawmill in the Owen river gorge. They logged the county in the vicinity of the Casa Diablo mine

with George Huckaby in charge of the logging operation. The logs were slid into the river by a shoot and floated down to the sawmill. From the mill the limber was again raised to the top of the gorge by horse tram, and teamed to its destination. The mill was operated only during the summer months and as soon as school was dismissed, Rachel moved to the camp on top to cook for the loggers. There was another cookhouse in the gorge. All the water for the upper camp was brought up in, barrels on the tramway.

With the sudden rapid growth of Tonopah Charles Wonacott took his 12-year-old son Bob with him to that town where he started a lumberyard and engaged in the building business. Later he took in as a partner, George Hall of Big Pine. In those days there was nobody to take care of the dead, and it fell to the carpenters To make wooden coffins which were covered with anything available. So carpentry led them into the undertaking business and they built a mortuary.

Bob spent two years there teaming, and then he returned to Bishop, and his mother, his sisters Vangie, Hattie, and his brothers. Harold and Dwight went to Tonopah. Bob and his brothers Forrest and Don (who had a threshing outfit with Charlie Olds. Sr.) stayed in the family home and teamed around Bishop and Big Pine principally hauling hay to the railroad at Laws to be sent to Sodaville and Tonopah. After two years of this Bob returned to Tonopah where he attended school and helped his father in the lumberyard and undertaking: parlor. Later his father purchased a horse drawn taxi from a Reno man, and for a couple of years Bob was its driver. Charles bought out George Hall and later Frank J. Cavanaugh became his partner in the mortuary, which still bears their names. Years later Charles Wonacott sold his interest in the building to Cavanaugh and when Wonacott passed away his old friend came from Tonopah to conduct his services.

Rachel did not like the wild, dirty boomtown and after four years there, she returned to her Bishop home. In 1908 Chares joined her, driving into town, as his daughter recalls driving a fine gray team. Charles Wonacott was always ready to take his share of public responsibility. He served on the Board of Trustees on both the elementary and the high school. For two terms he was a member of the Board of Supervisors of Inyo County. The roads of that day had no surface but natural dirt and despite constant use of plough and horse drawn grader, the roads were rough and always in need of repair. Charles Wonacott believed that if the roads were surfaced with gravel they would last much longer, and so he proposed that the Board of Supervisors purchase a road roller run by a gasoline engine. The rest of the Board did not think that the plan would prove satisfactory, and to prove to them its worth, Charles himself bought the equipment. After seeing the machinery work they were convinced of its practicality and reimbursed him for it. The roads built with crushed rock held their surface many times longer than the dirt surfaced roads, and the equipment was used by Inyo County for many years.

In 1915, the Inyo register reported, the Board of Supervisors voted to have a quarantine corral built at the Laws railroad station and Charles Wonacott was put in charge of the project. It was completed shortly and is still standing though now rarely used.

Charles Wonacott was a jolly, kindly man, happy-go-lucky and fond of teasing his friends and family. He loved children and was the father of nine. He was interested in the activities of the Methodist Church and both he and his daughter Carrie sang in the choir. He was a loyal member of the Elks Club of Bishop and the large elk tooth which hung on his generous chest was a familiar trinket which fascinated his young grandchildren. He was fond of animals too. Once after he had retired and had some leisure time, he was given a magpie that someone had caught. He tamed it, split its tongue and taught it to talk, and trained it so that when he would go out on the porch and call the bird; it would fly to him perch on his shoulder and peck at his ear or the elk's tooth, or search in his pocket for the cracker, which he would hide there. He was a very heavy man and many of his descendants have the same tendency toward obesity.

Rachel was more reserved than her husband. She was a neat housekeeper, thrifty, and a meticulous person. She loved to entertain large groups of her family and neighbors, and on occasions thirty or more would gather for family dinners. Her home was always open to everyone. Kate Boyd one of the neighbors and she particularly enjoyed having in her home.

Their family became closely related to the Thompson family by marriage. In fact three Wonacott boys were engaged to marry three Thompson girls. Don Wonacott married Maggie Thompson and Bob Wonacott married Carrie Thompson. The third marriage was prevented by a tragedy. Forrest Wonacott was soon to marry Jennie Thompson. At that time, about 1910, he was teaming for Frank Clark hauling freight from Laws Station to Bishop. One day he, Frank Clark and Ally McNally were teaming together. When the day's work was completed, Forrest unhitched his team, put his horse in the barn and went to get them some hay. He was found between the haystack and the barn, paralyzed. The victim of a stroke. Although he was only in his early thirties, gentle little Jennie waited for him to recover, but in a few years she herself died, and Forrest remained an invalid until his death in 1921.

Don and Maggie continued to live in Bishop on the Thompson ranch until they sold the property to the City of Los Angeles, Then they moved to Oakdale. Three of their four children were already in high school before they left Bishop.

Carrie married twice and had three children. Her elder son Allen McDonald was lost in the First World War. She met Larry DeLuchi, a very fine man who was the plumbing contractor for the high school which was being built at that time and they were married. She has lived in Oakdale with him ever since.

Hattie had two children, Charles and Forrest Bell. Her second husband was A.O. Adams, a building contractor who constructed the building where the Chalfant Press and other businesses are located, the theatre and the stores north of it to the Westerner, several of the power plants, some of Bishop's sidewalks and other Inyo buildings.

Harold was married but had no children. He passed away a few years ago. Vangie

Wonacott Backert Robinson has two children. She lives in Oakland. Dwight is married and has no children. He is living in Fresno (unable to read last part). The only child of Charles and Rachael Wonacott who remains in Bishop is Charles Albert (Bob). He is engaged in the dairy business. His daughter Thelma is married to Tom Summers Jr. and lives on a ranch near Minden, Nevada. They have three sons. His daughter Barbara is married to Horace Evans. They have one daughter and live at the family home in Bishop. His son Thomas married Kathleen Murphy, a teacher at Bishop High School. They live in Bishop and have no children.

Rachael Wonacott passed away in 1922 and Charles Wonacott in 1929, after earning the respect of all who knew them. Both are buried in the Pioneer Cemetery in Bishop.

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The material in this report is based on articles in the Inyo Register and on the personal reminiscences of members of the Wonacott family. Due to the time, which has elapsed since the events herein described, there may be some insecurities in recalling and interpreting the information, but to the best of our knowledge this is the Wonacott Story. (Papers of Forrest Backert)

(Compilers Note: the above statement appeared at the end of this document, however there is neither date nor any names of those who wrote this story. It is merely part of papers of Forrest Backert, son of Evangeline (Vangie) Wonacott, grandson of Charles and Rachael (Huckaby) Wonacott. I have since been told by Forrest Backert that this history was written by Kathleen Murphy Wonacott, wife of Tom Wonacott. It was written for a project for the Historical Society in Bishop, of which Kathleen was a member at that time.)