

William Taylor (1804-1890)

WILLIAM TAYLOR (1804-1890)

By Sally Knutson

(Paragraphs in italics are the exact words of William Taylor--spelling, punctuation and grammar as he wrote it.)

Great, great grandfather William Taylor is the perfect example of a Gold Rush Californian. His father and mother were born in North Carolina in the mid 1700s. His father, Daniel, served as a Captain in the Revolutionary War. Daniel moved his family to Sumner County, Tennessee in the late 1780's where William, the last of ten children, was born in 1804.

"Father first settled in Sumner County, middle Tennessee, where all the balance of his ten children was born. I was the youngest by seven years, born we may say in their old age, (colts born of old sires never amount to much)."

"Father moved to Montgomery County when I was only a month old, and bought land six miles north of Clarksville the county seat, and six or eight miles from the dividing line between Tennessee and Kentucky, where my first recollections of myself, and things surrounding me commensed."

William spent a delightful boyhood in Montgomery County Tennessee and when he was twelve; his father moved the family again. They built a raft and sailed down the Mississippi River to Pike County, Mississippi.

"Well, father sold his farm, had a boat built; how I watched the building as anxious to start as if I expected to travel over the world. As I am so anxious to start, we will consider "Broad Horn" finished. Launched, loaded, not forgetting the barrel of mellow peach brandy; we must not forget that. We will want it for medicinal purposes. All aboard, now cut the cable! Glorious! Smoothly we float down the Red River into the Cumberland, a little larger, thence into the Ohio, still larger, now we float into the great Mississippi. My! Oh!! How grand it appeared to me when first presented to my view."

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They reached Fort Adams where a sister's husband who had traveled overland, met them with wagons. Daniel bought an "improved" tract of land. They settled in Pike County on Topisaw Creek. William was sent to school in Monticello on the Pearl River. He hadn't been to school for a long time. He was behind and he didn't like school and being away from home. He found a storekeeper in town who hired him and he learned the business. His father by now was getting along in age. William was called home to care for the farm. He raised a crop of cotton and took it to market in New Orleans where he was hoodwinked by the buyer. On his way home he stopped to see a friend and met his first love. She was fifteen and his mother dissuaded him from marrying her.

"Father departed from the 'fudal' system and gave his real estate to his youngest son, and Bro. John and I concluded to build a water gin and 'griss' mill on my side of the creek"

In 1826 he did marry Rachel Hamilton, they moved north to Yazoo County, (a better area for farming). By 1833, he had buried his father, his mother, and Rachel. He had 5 children under the age of eight.

"Soon after this my mother died. She died very suddenly without a groan. I carried and buried her alongside of father. Not long after the death of mother, my wife died in giving birth to Rachel"

Within 6 months he had courted and married Catherine Jane Cameron. He writes:

"One Saturday I went to a Baptist meeting with our preacher. The church was within three or four miles of Mr. Cameron's. Of course, I looked at the congregated ladies. I saw a rose with black eyes. She must have looked at me at the same time, for the cupid's dart had pierced a vital part. After the meeting was dismissed, through a friend and acquaintance I received an introduction to Miss Cameron. I asked permission and was granted the pleasure of riding home with her, I found her parents such as I considered qualified to bring up a daughter in the way she should go. I gave a good deal on the mother. The old folks and brothers were sociable and friendly and my black eyes and rosy cheeks seemed friendly also. After good many pleasant visits I put the ring on her finger!"

Catherine and William had 10 children together. Nine of them were born in Mississippi. William did many things before he decided to join the Gold Rush to California. He built

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several mills, he ran a mercantile business, he farmed, he was a justice of the peace and a postmaster. He made several fortunes and lost them. He was a man very discouraged with himself by 1850.

“While living at this place the Mexican war occurred. Franklin, my oldest son, although not more than eighteen, volunteered, went with the first Mississippi rifles, served his line with credit, married, went to California, when the gold excitement broke out, had a hard time going and coming home, but returned in twenty months with his pocket full of fifty dollar slugs. Franklin's favorable report, with all the wonderful newspaper stories, no wonder that I was anxious to build up my former losses and had the gold fever!”

“Well, to cut it short, for it is unpleasant to think about, our machinery was too heavy, the mill would cut only about as much lumber as our little mill did working in the water and being so much around it, gave me the chill and fever, and I became discouraged. I had been two years working at this enterprise.

Brother John had made me a visit while I was working at the mill, and I said to him, if this enterprise fails, I will go to California, being sick and discouraged I determined to carry out my threat.”

His sawmill failed so he gathered three sons: Thomas 23, William 16 and Robert 15, and with a friend, Hiram Norman, made ready to head for California.

“We bid "good buy" to little mother the "ballance" of my dear children and started for the long trip, not knowing whether I would ever see them again! and with a two horse wagon started for Memphis. Cornelius and a negro boy went with us to bring the wagon and team back.”

They had bad luck from the very start. William took a chill and was very sick. They bought passage on a boat going to Independence but couldn't take their provisions aboard and had to ship them with a captain and ship which William didn't like the looks of. When the ship didn't arrive with their goods, William and another man hired a buggy and drove to Independence where they found disaster.

“At Independence we camped near the landing, waiting for our outfit, which never reached us. In a few days we received the news that the Saluda had blown up at

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Lexington. A gentleman going to California and I hired a buggy and went to Lexington. We found the boat near the shore, with at least one half the front torn to fragments! There was a large crowd of Mormon "emigrants on board and an awful loss of lives. Some blown into the river and some on the bank! The captain was blown on the bank a corpse terribly mangled! I found nothing of our outfit but a "ceag" of medical brandy and did not get that."

They formed a company with 20 other wagons. The only man with a wife was elected captain. Both of his younger boys came down with a bad case of the measles. The wife didn't help him with the boys and made them camp away from the rest of the train. This treatment did not sit well with William so he and his crew broke off and went on their own even though they were warned it would be dangerous to travel alone.

"One Sunday we found a good camp, grass and water plenty, but we had left the road farther than usual and I confess I felt rather lonesome, if it was a lovely evening, which it really was! Late in the evening we saw a lone "waggon" approaching our camp. I recollect my feelings to this day. I desired company. The "waggon" came up, permission was asked to camp with us. Of course, it was cheerfully granted. The company consisted of two brothers named "Warm?", a nephew the same name and a married niece and her husband. I forget his name, but the niece was my angel! We soon agreed to travel together and did so until we came to the "sink" of the "Humbolt". They took the Carson and we the "trucky" "rout".

"By the time we reached the foot of the sharp divide we had congregated a pretty good company, and it was well we had, for it was with "difficulty" even by doubling teams to get our now nearly empty "waggons" to the top of the summit. As stated, our company had increased until we had at "leas" fifteen or twenty able bodied men, at the foot of the mountain one lone "waggon" we found waiting for some one to come up and help him. He had a wife and two or three children and it was well for him, for as he afterwards told us, he had seen some Indians and he now knew they were watching him and no doubt would have stolen all his cattle if they had not done more mischief. That "knight" the Indians did get one of his oxen as you will presently see."

"We had no more "acidents" until the day we reached the blue tent, near the south Yuba, when we turned out at noon, our cattle ate some kind of "pisen" weed or shrub that acted like a most powerful "emittick". Oh! but didn't they throw up and looked sick! I had never seen or "herd" of anything like it! I gave it up. We had lost our team at last! but we was

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near the Golden Nugget, and we could walk and pack on our backs what we had in our "waggon" the balance of the distance! but after stopping often to let the steers throw up the "pissen" they had taken, we managed to reach the blue tent, where we were informed that cattle was often "pisened" at the place where we nooned, but generally got over it by good treatment. We turned ours out on a good place of good grass and pure cool water and in about two weeks sold them at auction in Nevada City. This is the first and last auctioning I ever did. I had the "waggon" and team driven up before the most "publick" place I could find, mounted the most elevated and "conspikuous" place convenient, cried out, "Oh yes, Oh yes, a "waggon" and team for sale", and I had a good many bidders. Cattle and "waggon" were in good demand, and I obtained more, Yes! more than satisfied my most "sanguin" expectations!

I now sent home to my little wife and mother to encourage her, six hundred dollars, although I believe she was well provided for before I left home! but it was safer than if I had put it in Adams Express Company bank, but this was the last remittance in the year 1852."

William tells about the travails he and his sons had during the winter of 1852-53. It snowed and rained most of the first part of the year and they were living in tents and an abandoned cabin. The boys were sick; the oldest boy, Thomas, left them and went on his own. William was pretty desperate.

"January 1st, 1853 I received my first letter from home, (it took a long time to send and receive letters) this letter was from Azaline. It was so affectionate, wished she was with dear Pa to cook his dinners, (she did not know how rough we lived). Gave us information about our home and family, and said a great many kind things. I had no "idia" of returning home just now, but this letter set me to thinking about my dear family, and I decided that I could not, nor would not, be "seperated" from my family. I had not, with all the discouragement, given up the "idia" of finding gold. Some were finding fortunes; why not when all my boys are together, some of us must strike it! I did not know at that time that California was richer in other resources than hunting for gold, and a thousand times more certain, and another thing influenced me, I had not got over my big failures! It stuck to me as a disgrace! and I wanted to make as wide a gap as was possible, and the "Pacifick" Ocean was as far as I could go! where I hoped by a hard struggle and possible luck, to regain my former standing and the shortest way was by hunting for gold."

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After borrowing money from his young friend Norman, he walked to Rough and Ready and then to Penn Valley on his way to Marysville to catch a boat to San Francisco. There was quite a band of men “going home”. They walked together in the deep mud. He says it was so muddy a mule could not have made it.

“We reached Marysville that "knight". Here we found a boat ready to start in the morning. Boats had no "difficulty" of landing where the bridge now stands. The channel was deep, no stickers then. The Sacramento River and Country as far as we could see was a sea of water. Poor Sacramento had just been burned and "fluded" by the overflow. No new house had been built. The charred posts of some could be seen, the whole picture did look awful! I did not go on shore and could not if I had wished, indeed it did look awful and here many poor fellows lost their all.”

His description of sailing the Pacific Coast to Acapulco and then to Panama City, crossing the Isthmus on foot and eventually arriving in Havana where he changed ships for New Orleans is quite extensive. He arrived home and found everything there in fine shape. He had a hard time convincing his wife to make the trip to California. She had seven little children. The baby was not quite two years old.

They sold off their farm, equipment, livestock and headed west. The trip is well recorded. They had a few adventures but arrived in California before the winter weather set in.

“After this we had no trouble for the want of grass and water. We "crossed" the "Sarrea" Nevada at the "Heness" (Henness) Pass and I had been expecting "difficulty" in getting over the summit, but we "passed" several miles and I "discoverd" we were going down pretty rapidly, and must have passed the rubicon without noticing the divide.”

They paid their older boys a visit. They had been pretty successful on the Yuba River. William was in a huge hurry to find housing for his family because he remembered the winter before and how miserable it was with rain and snow.

“One of my mules was a fine "travler". I mounted, went to Grass Valley to see a friend who had "crossed" the plains with me the year before. The friend "toled" me, that the Tennessee Ranch was for sale, and he thought it a bargain at two thousand dollars, and "recommended" it very highly. I went to see the Buena Vista ranch, but the price was too high. I really did not like it and "woud" not have bought it if I had had the money. I

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returned and "staid" all "knight" at the Tennessee Ranch. The ranch belonged to Charly Gassoway and a partner (I have forgot his name). Gassoway was away from home, but his partner showed and pointed out all the good "qualitis" of the ranch. There was one thing I liked it was on a very "publick" road, where by going to the door we could see "waggons" and "travlers" all the time. I never did like to be outside of nowhere, but like to see and have company, but on the "hole" did not think the ranch worth the price, and started to look further. About the time I reached Pet Hill, the heavens decided it; clouds began to loom up; I "stoped" in the road (I remember this "occurance" "distinclly"), deliberated, looked up at the clouds, "stoped" some time, and finally decided this will never do. My family must be housed, the rain is coming! If I could have seen the fore sight as well--it did not rain more than a sprinkle for a long time afterwards; if the clouds had not "interferd" God only knows what would have been our fate for either good or bad; but the decision was made, I turned back, and bought the Ranch, and paid two hundred dollars to secure the bargain."

During the next three years a son died, a son was born and the oldest daughter married. The new son-in-law was a Nevada City store keeper and he offered William a job of keeping the books and tending the store. Then they decided to open a store in the new diggings called Humbug. William went to Humbug to tend that butcher shop.

"How long I had charge of Mr. Johns business I have now forgot, no matter. Mr. Johns proposed a copartnership in starting a store and butcher shop in a new camp, then "caled" Humbug but afterwards changed to N. (North) Bloomfield we arranged for him to go up to Humbug, build a store house and start the butchering business, and I to go to San Francisco and lay in a stock of goods. Mr. Johns had sold out his stock of goods in Nevada City and rented his brick store for four hundred dollars a month, a handsome income, that I believe would have satisfied my highest ambition, but the Brick though considered fire proof, afterward burnt, when the city was swept by the awful fire of fifty six. Fire proof buildings were then considered so safe that a good many "staid" in them during the fire and burnt! It was awful!! Poor Johns must have felt as I did when my all was swept from under me!"

"We had the first store in Humbug (1856) but unfortunately Mr. Johns located in the wrong place. There was a much "handsomer" and level piece of ground for the town close by on which the village was built. More stores came in, tavern, blacksmith shop, livery stable, grog shops, "Hurddgerdy" houses, "Brewry", and we became quite a little village with a school house and a snug little school, a doctor, and post office, we "cept" the post office but we were on the outside of the village but notwithstanding continued to

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do a very good business until we had to refuse a good many customers that was slow pay that we could not furnish beef, pork and lamb without they paid us. Some of the citizens got up their dander and induced another butcher to come in who located in the most populous part of the town; this was soon after the disaster of the tree. If I could have "cept" the "control" of the meat trade, it would have been a pretty fair business of its "slf", but two butcher shops, in our little village, could not live! It is different from any other business meat wont "ceep". You must sell so much daily, if you butcher your own cattle. You see trouble hardly ever comes single. This was nearly as discouraging as the "faling" of the tree, but we continued to retain the best of the cash customers until our "oposition" butchers concluded it would be best to buy us out, they offered a pretty fair price which we "accepted".

"A mining camp is a dangerous place to do a credit business, indeed with the "strickest" precaution, merchants, if they credit much, will inevitably loose a great "deel". They had better cry over goods on the shelf, than a doubtful debt. My misfortune was I was too anxious to sell!"

"We left North Bloomfield out of debt, I "staid" until "evry" dollar was paid, and with my family returned to the Ranch.

The wheat crop was a failure it took the smut and was unfit for bread"

"Mr Hatch at Indian Springs had built a School House, with the expectation of building up a flourishing institution of learning the "yong" "idia" to shoot, and it did look promising, for at this time he had, a good many boarding ""scholars" besides the "neighbourhood" support. I went to see Mr. Hatch and told him that I wished to send some of my children but did not know when I could pay him, schooling was high. Send them! Send them all!! Never mind the pay! I sent Katie, Gerty, Allen and John, Eddy was too "yong", but when I went to settle for the schooling, the amt was pretty large for me at this time and he wanted more interest than I thought the law allowed, but he finally agreed to the amt I was willing to give and I gave my note as well as I recollect at two per cent per month. I believe that was the currant interest for money lent at that time. I finally paid the note and interest although it was a pretty big debt for me "strugling" as I had to support my family by my own "leighbor", as said before all my first children had gone to seek their fortunes, and the little ones depending on me for their bread, none of them old enough to help me! But my motto was never give up the ship, so long as there is a plank to stand on!"

Poor William did everything he could think of to make enough money to support his family. He tried to grow wheat and it had smut. He tried hauling timber and hay to Sacramento and had a

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horrid accident with one of his wagons. He bought a smaller wagon and peddled from Marysville to Nevada City. He liked being in the merchandise business. It was a lot of work and he was away from home much of the time. His son Robert took the wagons to Nevada to get in on the Comstock trade. William built a big barn on his ranch and after the terrible livery fire in Rough and Ready was offered the chance to become the stopping place for the stages.

“Well the stages were all “runing” and stopping with us as agreed on. The down stage from Nevada came down a little before day break. I got up in time to have a nice cup of hot coffee, cakes, and pies, etc. (you all know I had a large fireplace in the front room), built a rousing fire, there was some good eats of different kinds if wanted. Everything looked cheerful and comfortable! I often placed in the till four or five dollars in the morning, with the dinners at noon and other “travling” customers, now did not this look encouraging? I “cept” an “acurate” account at the time and was making over one hundred and fifty dollars clear of all expenses family included. We had finished our barn, built a large shed before the house for the stages and teamsters, to shelter under out of the rain and sun, but just as we had completed all this and “laid” by no money, the rail road flew by, changed the Sacramento “rout” and we lost the Sacramento “travil”. The Marysville stages “stopt” with us afterward, but never was profitable well here was a tumble again from anticipation!!”

“I never dreamed that my dear wife and mother would be the first to depart this life, for she was ten years “yonger”, had always been healthy, while at times I had been sick! but God in his providence ordered it “differant”! and I have left a long, long time to mourn her loss! She had been a faithful companion under trying as well as pleasant circumstances. Yes Mother drew her last breath surrounded by her children 10th of August 1869. I was sitting by her side, she breathed her last breath without a struggle! she fell a sleep! the long sleep! the eternal sleep!! and left her darling children and I to mourn her loss!!”

Dear, dear William was only 65 years old when this latest blow struck. He had lost two young sons, two wives and there was still another tragedy to come. In 1875, his son John, a student at the University of California at Berkeley came home for the summer and took some friends into the High Sierra and was shot to death. William managed to live to be 84. He spent his last days visiting his children and their families. He considered his life to have been a failure but when I think of all he did and the people he left, I consider him MY HERO.

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This journal was hand written in 1884 when William Taylor was 80 years old. My mother, Katheryn June Barker Hoffman and I transcribed it over a period of 30 years. I have the original leather bound journal and will one day give it to the California State Historic Library in Sacramento. I have the entire journal on Word and can send all or part to anyone who would like to read it. SHK

Sally Barker Hoffman Knutson

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Nevada City, California

sallyh@fsaccess.net

See a list of William's children on the next page.

Children of William Taylor

- Azalene Johns lived in Sacramento. She and Alfred Johns had seven daughters.
- Gertrude Barker lived in Grass Valley. She married Charles Barker from New Hampshire. She was my great grandmother. She had three sons.
- Kate Obrien married a well to do Irish lawyer. Thomas Victor O'Brien and Kate had 5 sons and lived in Belvedere and San Francisco.
- Robert lived most of his life in Nevada. He had one son and 4 daughters. He died in Alameda County, California.
- William lived in the San Joaquin Valley and had two sons and two daughters.
- Cornelius became a lawyer, married twice and had two daughters. He lived most of his life in Nevada County. He died in Montana.
- Edgar married twice and had three daughters and a son who became a noted Southern California artist. (Edgar Dorsey Taylor) His oldest daughter married Robert McMurray Searls.
- Thomas married and had two sons and three daughters. He settled in the Fresno area of California.
- Franklin, the oldest son, stayed in Mississippi, married and had three sons and a daughter.
- The three girls from his first family all stayed in Mississippi and married. Two of them had children. The third raised a pair of children from her husbands' former marriage.