

NUGGETS FROM THE PAST
by Norman McCleod
A BATH SURVIVOR REMEMBERS

In 1850 the former gold mining town of Bath was founded by a merchant named John Bradford, who was attracted to the site because of its excellent pasturage for a livestock ranch. He erected a cabin as a residence but mainly for its purpose as a storehouse for his wares shipped by wagon from Sacramento. His retail store was located at Stony Bar on the Middle Fork of the American River.

In the fall of that year Bradford sold his cabin to a group of prospectors that wintered in it. They spent this off-season hunting deer and looking for gold prospects. Eventually they found the yellow mineral in paying quantities, resulting in other miners flocking to the site and in the organizing of a settlement that was given the name of Volcano.

The town grew fast and as another town existed with the same name on the opposite side of the Middle Fork, the name was changed to Sarahsville, honoring the wife of a miner named Thomas Hosmer. Sarah was the first woman to settle in the town where she was highly respected by the boom town's males.

In 1858 a federal Post Office was established in the settlement and given the name of Bath. However, as Foresthill grew, Bath commenced to suffer the loss of many of its residents until by 1882 there were left an estimated 200 souls. Eventually even these 200 disappeared when the last operating mines shut down.

But this story is not about the town of Bath. It's about Miriam Oreno, an ex-resident who may possibly be the last surviving inhabitant of that current ghost town on the Foresthill Divide.

Miriam was born on February 1, 1905 in San Jose. At the time her parents were living in the gold mining settlement of Bullion, where she lived with them for approximately two years. The family's next move was to Bath, located about 1½ miles southeast of Foresthill.

Shortly after moving into their home it was consumed by a fire that somehow started in the chimney in their living room. The mother who was alone with her two young children managed to pull them out of the burning structure to safety. Miriam recalls that she was reluctant to be saved because she was playing with her toys in her bedroom.

Her parents bought another home in which Miriam lived until she was 14. As she had now arrived at the high school age it was necessary that she move to Auburn to be within walking distance of her school. At that time there were no school buses running between Foresthill and Auburn. The James Walsh family found her a room in a private home.

Upon graduating she found a couple of minor jobs, one working for the author Jackson Gregory and the other for a medical doctor. Neither position satisfied her so she returned to her parents' home in Bath awhile, but the bright lights and excitement of Auburn beckoned to her.

Upon returning to that bustling town she found a job as a waitress in the Freeman Hotel, owned and managed by James Walsh. This lasted until she met her future husband. She was only 16 when they married. He was 21. He thought Miriam was 18 when they wed and later he would often joke, "If I'd known she was only 16 I wouldn't have married her."

The couple resided in Auburn for a year during which time Miriam gave birth to their first child. After the child was born they pulled up stakes and moved to Eureka, Utah where he found work in a gold mine. This job lasted 10 years until 1936 when the entire country was locked in the arms of the Great Depression. The mine shut down. The Orenos were forced to move back to California where they settled in Foresthill. By this time they had two children, a boy and a girl.

Here they finished raising their children. Miriam's husband found a steady position with the U.S. Government Engineers, that provided them a comfortable living until he retired.

The house in which Miriam currently resides on the Baltimore Mine Road, stood originally in Bath and is more than 100 years old. It was torn down board by board and moved to Foresthill by two small horses and a buggy. Her father and uncle rebuild the house but only with great effort as neither gentleman professed to know much about carpentry.

Miriam asserts that at one time Bath was larger than Foresthill. It had a large store building next to the post office, a hotel, butcher and blacksmith shops, a saloon etc. Miriam claims to be able to point out these sites today. When the mines were working full bore there were numerous private residences in Bath but as time progressed they disappeared one by one, all casualties of that dreaded calamity -- FIRE! Then too, when the mines ceased production there were no jobs and the town's population moved elsewhere.

Tom Haney, who for years owned and operated the Maintop roadhouse, resided in Bath during his declining years. His home possessed the only running water in town so the school children (eight of them) took turns running to his house for buckets of water. Tom loved the children and usually gave them small gifts like a candy mint apiece. This they loved. This was the high spot of their days.

Tom was a born entertainer. He enjoyed singing for the children, play his violin and recite Romeo and Juliet like a veteran actor.

Miriam maintains that Sarah Hosmer, the original Sarah the settlement was named after, lies buried in

our Foresthill Community Cemetery. (You can safely bet I'll be looking for it.)

Miriam recalls that Sarah's home was a joy to visit. She had a large aviary with singing canaries and four old-style phonographs. When she played records the birds joined in like an angelic chorus. Unfortunately, like so many others in the community, Sarah's home was one day destroyed by fire. Everything was burned with the exception of Sarah's favorite rocker that Miriam was able to rescue from the flames.

The eight students of the one-room school accepted gladly the pleasurable duty after classes of hiking to the post office in Foresthill to pick up their parents' mail. When asked what games she played as a child, Miriam replied, "Baseball. We loved the game and the boys played with us."

Saturday night dances were everyone's great delight. When she was just 12 Miriam accompanied her parents to the dancehall in Foresthill where she danced waltzes and lively fox trots with boys her age. "Those dances were very popular," she says. "People came from miles around, even as far away as Placerville."

When she was about the age of 10 Miriam knew Annie Austin, the one-time Foresthill historian. Annie was about 20 then and had a boyfriend. "We girls all loved Annie because when we went to her home to visit she'd lend us her dresses and we'd play grown-up all day long," Miriam recalls. "Annie would walk to Bath to meet her boyfriend after his work and they'd walk back to Foresthill together, hand in hand. Their eventual marriage made us all happy."

While in Miriam's home in 1978 for the interview I observed a painting on her wall. She explained that it was her painting of the Bath schoolhouse. It was good. I asked if one day she might consider donating it to the Foresthill museum. She said no, she had other plans for it. I then asked if she would give any thought of doing another painting of the subject for our museum. She said she would think about it.

Twenty years later, in the spring of 1998, she donated to the museum two of her paintings, fully framed, one of the Bath schoolhouse and the other of her home in that town. These two works of art are now hanging on the wall in our museum.

Thank you Miriam!

Epilog: Soon after writing this article I drove to our Community Cemetery and within five minutes I located the well-marked grave of Sarah. She lies buried alongside her husband and apparently two of her children.