

NUGGETS FROM THE PAST

by
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DEADWOOD

A rope sign on a tree near the old gold mining town of Deadwood on the Foresthill Divide, in 1952 led a visitor in the area to one of the town's last residents who was leading an existence almost completely free from worry, an unusual circumstance in any age.

The visitor was May W. Perry of Auburn, who was in charge at the time of the Placer County Museum. She was attracted by the sign "Wills' Haven" and decided to investigate to see for herself who had found a haven and why. She and a traveling companion drove down a narrow, steep mountain road until they arrived at the "Bear Wallop Mine", otherwise known as a one-man settlement.

Considerable hoo-hooing attached the attention of Jim Willis the so-called hermit who disdained a mere log cabin in favor of a five room house complete with service porch, basement, complete bathroom, hot and cold water and Venetian blinds. Willis always delighted to welcome visitors to that lonely spot, invited the two ladies inside presumably to show off his batch of hard tack and sourdough bread fresh from the oven.

After inspecting the house the ladies were guided through the Willis vegetable garden that might have been the envy of any valley farmer. On display were six-pound cabbages, large potatoes, parsnips, big broad-leaved Swiss chard 12 to 15 inches high and garlic five to six times larger than average. This garden was surrounded by Venetian blind slats for pickets to discourage wild animals. Willis was especially proud of a tunnel he had dug to create a spring above his garden that dropped cold water down by gravity.

Willis' green thumb was credited to his grandfather who settled in Byrd Valley (near Michigan bluff) in 1852, who was famous for miles around for his garden and orchard produce. He supplied many of the mining camps on the divide with fresh food supplies.

Wood was Willis' only fuel and he felled and sawed trees into stove lengths. Jim Willis existence cannot be described as "easy living". He revealed to the ladies his planned work projects for several years ahead. His nearest neighbor lived several miles away and he had no transportation unless a friend happened along.

Usually in late October Jim worked with an acquaintance to haul in the winter supplies. After the first shows he just plain hibernated with his dogs, cat and radio until spring. There were times when he could not open his back door for weeks due to the heavy snows piling up to the roof.

May Perry became impressed that her host was a real modern hermit, one with few worries who let the days slip by one by one. Still, she clung to her private enjoyments in exploring out of the way places to see how the other fellow lived and where.