



Jon Williams/Neighbors

Joe Horton compares the new tombstone, right, to the original, found inside a nearby bush.

49er's tombstone safe from vandals

By John Trumbo
Neighbors staff writer

Robert Dunbar McKee can rest in peace.

His tombstone is safely buried with him at Stony Bar in the American River Canyon, out of reach of vandals and souvenir seekers.

The Gold Rush 49er's grave marker, reported stolen last spring, was found two weeks ago by a group of history buffs who had hiked to the gravesite in the deep canyon above Foresthill to erect a replica of the stolen marker.

Rather than uproot the new stone or carry out the original, the group buried McKee's marker on the spot.

"We left the replica, so in case the new one gets ripped off we can come back and have another tombstone party," said Allen Klahn, 44, of Auburn.

Klahn said the group had just finished setting the new stone on the 132-year-old grave when he spotted the original marker in nearby brush.

"We had just had cheers to the dear departed old miner,

and, lo and behold, there it was. Needless to say, everybody's eyes were pretty wide," Klahn said.

Expedition leader Gene Markley of Folsom organized the outing after hearing of the theft last spring. Markley, who regularly conducts Sierra Club trips and history treks in the area, decided it would be nice to put up another marker and do some research on McKee.

McKee, he said, was born in Butler, Penn., in 1816. He was an early Gold Rusher at Stony Bar who may have wintered there in 1849-50. According to historical accounts, Markley said, the severe winter drove Indians from the Foresthill Divide into the canyon to escape the snow.

"The miners felt threatened by the large numbers of Indians wintering there, so they sent some guys out for weapons and bullets. And that's the first mention of Stony Bar," Markley said.

McKee survived the winter and Indians only to die of unknown causes at age 37 in 1853. His grave is all that remains of the miners' camp.

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Miner Joe Horton hauls the tombstone down the canyon, where the original once stood. Horton reported the old stone missing to the Placer Conservation Task Force.

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Tombstone

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Curiously, McKee's marker came 21 years later. A brother, J. Cooper McKee, a career Army surgeon, Civil War veteran for the North and an Indian campaigner in the Southwest, visited Robert's lone grave in 1874. He placed the marker for his brother.

McKee's stone was undisturbed for 111 years, until its theft last March.

Bill Chandler of Lincoln made the replica tombstone.

Chandler, working from photographs provided by Markley, created a wooden replica, which was used to make a plaster mold. The final product was made from concrete poured into the plaster.

Chandler, a retired lithographer, used a router

and hand carving tools to duplicate the ornate stone-cut letters. "I had to experiment," he said. "Problems arose as I went along. The grain of the wood created problems when it got wet (from making the plaster mold)."

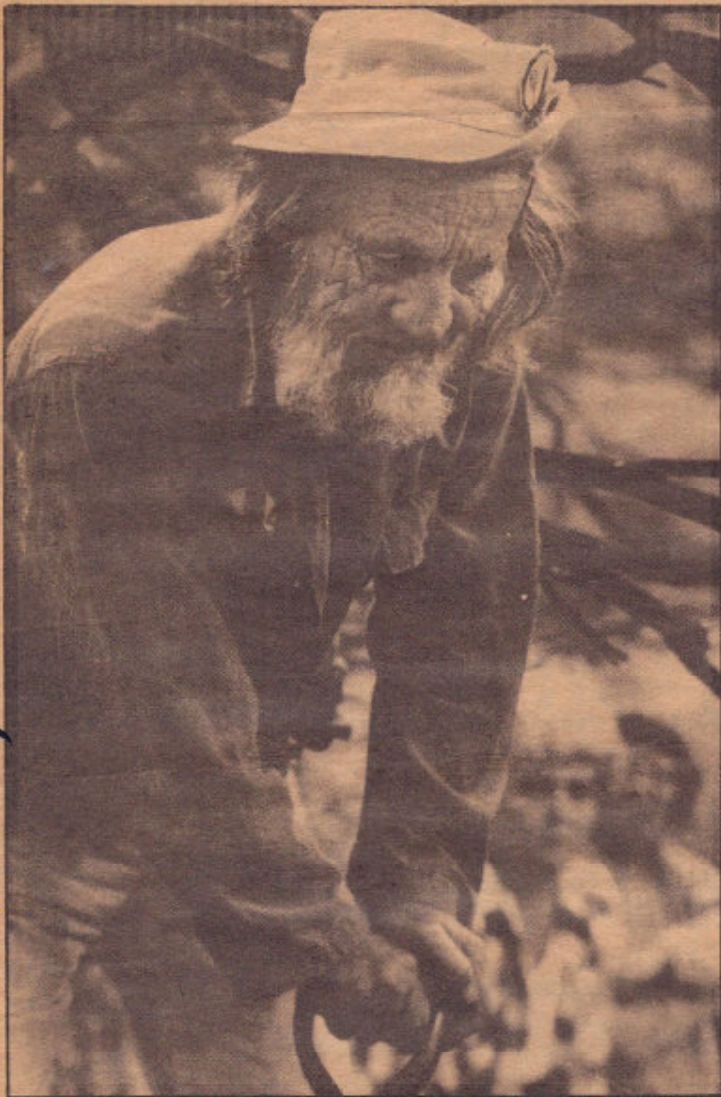
The final product, said Klahn, was a remarkably close copy.

Robert Kjolseth of Auburn did the research on the McKee brothers. "We think there was a third brother in Placerville, and he probably led (J. Cooper McKee) to the grave," Markley said.

Foresthill miner Joe Horton, who reported the theft and who also was part of the recent tombstone party, said the reappearance of McKee's marker was a bit mysterious. "It wasn't there before, because I looked," Horton said.

He suggested that the culprits' consciences might have prompted them to quietly return the marker.

Klahn had another explanation. "I'd say there's a mighty powerful spirit in that canyon."



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Harold Noll helps dig up the concrete that held the original tombstone in place for 111 years.



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Bill Chandler, who made the replica at his Lincoln home, steadies the marker.