

Nuggets from the Past

By Norman McLeod

There once was an old fellow ...

Certainly one of the more historically knowledgeable and experienced old timers of Foresthill was the late John DeMaria, Sr. I interviewed him in his home in 1978.

I knew John and his wife, Mildred, from my membership in our local historical society; in fact, he and Mildred had recently co-authored a book on local history titled: "There Once Was an Old Fellow."

John was born in Auburn in 1911. His earliest memory went back to the Panama-Pacific Exposition in San Francisco. He was riding in a streetcar with his parents. Because all the seats were taken, he had to stand.

This made him angry, so he vented his feelings on a big woman strap-hanging in front of him. He punched her in the back, and she turned around to investigate. She was the first black person he had ever seen, and when she saw how small her attacker was, she laughed out loud.

John enjoyed the fair, especially the Placer County exhibit handled by a Mr. Reva with his working model of a bucket line dredge inside a tankful of water.

John was raised in a hamlet called Spring Garden, several miles west of Foresthill. In 1978, his old home was still standing - and I believe it is today. He attended the old Spring Garden School that stood on the intersection where you turn off the Foresthill Road to go to Yankee Jim's.

No more than 10 or 12 students were enrolled in the one-room school, some of them walking the five miles from Yankee Jim's. "They walked both ways, and never missed a mud puddle," John said, smiling.

"I started school in 1915," he recalled. "I graduated in 1923, then attended high school in Auburn. The Spring Garden School was closed when the new school in Foresthill was built. My father bought the old school and used it as rental property."

John remembered that a roadhouse was located across from the school. The old fellow who owned it, Andy Steel, was public-spirited enough to make swim suits from gunnysacks for the school children to wear in the local mud reservoir in which they swam. He also let them use his chicken house for changing clothes.

Upon graduating from Placer High School in 1928, John worked in the Gray Eagle Mine near Spring Garden running an air compressor. "I was paid \$4 a day; sometimes I worked only half days and was paid \$2.50," John musingly said. "I worked usually six days a week. The Gray Eagle was located about a mile north of McKeon. It had a 7,000-foot tunnel, but we were mining about 5,000 feet in."

After this job, he worked two-and-a-half years in the old Freeman Hotel in Auburn as a desk clerk.

"Foresthill? It was pretty quiet in those days," John said. "In 1918 the World War shut down quite a few mines and they never did re-open. I worked four or five years in

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*John DeMaria Sr.
Mildred DeMaria*

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the family mine in Bath Canyon. I also worked quite awhile off and on in the Peckham Hill Mine. It was a stock-selling company with a deep shaft that originally was sunk in the 1870s. Due to cave-ins, the new owners never did reach the bottom where it was felt the gold was."

John's father owned and operated the Red Ink Mine most of his adult life. "I can remember only two years of his life when he worked for someone else," John said.

Our conversation drifted to the various mine tunnels that supposedly penetrate beneath the Foresthill streets. According to John, they're there all right, some boring in as far as Main Street, others dug through to the head of Devil's Canyon just north of town. These mines were the Tiger, the Henning Pit, the Jenny Lind and Jersey Lily, the Independence, Rough and Ready (S.H. Garrison's Mine), the Deidesheimer and the India Rubber.

In 1938, John found on his own "a nice pocket of gold and I built this house." The DeMaria home stands today on Lowe Street in downtown Foresthill.

I asked him if he knew the identity of the oldest home in town. He thought it was the big, two-story house on the corner of Gold and Lowe Streets. He said his 1861 map of the town shows it as the William Forrest house. He'd heard from old timers it was the first house erected in the new town, after it was moved from under the ridgetop. On the morning after the first night Forrest slept in his relocated home, he looked out his bedroom window, saw a deer where the Foresthill Lodge now stands, and shot it. Supposedly, Mr. Forrest was responsible for naming the town.

"John," I asked, "how did Racetrack Street gets its name?" His reply was immediate. "They used to conduct horse races on it, but that was before my time. At the Red Point Mine, there was a horse named Red Point Billy used for pulling loaded ore cars out of the tunnel. This animal was quite a character. If he was left out alone, he'd hide in a side tunnel, then he'd sneak outside somehow and hide in the woods. When they went looking for him he'd run right over them.

"Some miners thought he might do good in a race so they put him up against a sleek pony - and Billy won. The miners bet heavily on him so they won big."

John recollected that most stagecoach banditry occurred before his time. He called one a tragedy. "There was an old man lived down at the river named Bullard. He used to ride with the stages for one reason or another. One time it was held up by a bandit and Bullard and his son were ordered out of the stage and left behind.

"Later, the company sent an armed guard down to the place and he mistook the two men as the robbers. He fired on them, killing old man Bullard. Most people thought it a mistake, but others believed that Bullard and his son were the bandits. It was reported that the guard who did the shooting never sat by an open window again."

Henry Ford, the town's blacksmith, died when John was a child. He was the auto manufacturer's uncle. In the late 1920s, the Detroit tycoon made a couple trips here to visit his relatives. Old Henry was the frugal type; he didn't give them a dime. If he'd offered one they wouldn't have taken it, so they got along fine.

One cousin, Billy Ford, went back to Detroit with Henry and was handed a soft job in the Ford plant. When the other workers discovered he was a relative of the boss, they frowned on Billy. He didn't like it much, so he returned to Foresthill.

John and his wife Mildred were married in 1939. They eloped to Reno. Mildred's grandparents lived here, and she often visited them from Sacramento where she was raised. John and she met at a dance in Foresthill. They had a son and a daughter.

Mildred DeMaria still lives in the house that gold built on lower Lowe Street.