

Pannebakker Familie Views

A Newsletter for the Pannebakker Family Association

R e a l " C o v e r e d W a g o n " P i o n e e r s

By Sherman T. Pennebaker

As written in the Exeter Sun, April 10, 1952

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Real "covered wagon" pioneers – people who came to California by covered wagon before it was possible to make the trip by train – are becoming extremely scarce. Sherman T. Pennebaker who, although he made the trip so early in life that he remembers but very little of it, qualifies as a genuine covered wagon emigrant.

He grew up in Tulare County with a lively interest in all that went on about him, as a boy helping his father to herd sheep, cattle and hogs over most of the county and during an active adult life contributing a great deal to the development of the Exeter district. He retains an active mind and an alert interest in the present as well as in the old days.

He was born in 1864 in Iowa. His father and mother were born in Indiana and his father, W. G. Pennebaker, served three years in the Civil War. It was only natural that his son should be given the name of a famous Union general.

George F. Pennebaker, a brother of W. G. Pennebaker, had come to California in 1849 as a miner and returned east in the sixties to make up a wagon train of emigrants bound for California. The train of 45 wagons was assembled in southwestern Iowa and headed west over the old trail across Nebraska to the Platte river, following the old Mormon trail to Salt Lake, where some of the wagons split off and went to Oregon, the others continuing on to California. W. G. Pennebaker was captain of the train and his brother, George, was guide. Their parents, Mr. and Mrs. William Pennebaker, an elderly couple, also traveled with the train in their own wagon, outfitted comfortably for housekeeping with a stove and other conveniences.

Mr. and Mrs. W. G. Pennebaker had with them their five children: Sherman, his three older sisters, and a brother only four months old, who survived the rigors of the trip as well as the others. Sherman was but four year old.

The trip was made a year before the first transcontinental railroad was completed. The road was far from good, and while the Indian menace had abated somewhat from what it had been 10 years before, it was still present. Even more of a menace were the renegated whites who lurked along the trail, ready to steal the livestock of travelers and whatever else they could lay their hands on. W. G. Pennebaker kept a careful, but brief journal of the trip, and one must read between the faded pencil lines to supply the color that the wagon train captain, weighed down with responsibility, was probably too weary to put in at the time of the journey.

At one point along the trail, most of the train's horses were stampeded in the night. Three horses had been picketed, and were not run off, so Pennebaker and two other young men started trailing the horses. During the second day of trailing, about 125 miles from the wagon train, the three men came upon a camp and asked there for information regarding their stock but were told that the horses had not been seen. However, one honest man at the camp told them that the horses were being held in a cove and directed where they might find them. Next morning, they approached the leader of the camp and told him they knew where the horses were and intended to take them. They were allowed to proceed to do so without incident. Only one incident remains in Sherman Pennebaker's memory of the trip across the plains. He recalls the Geo. Pennebaker had with him an Indian boy, Jeff, about 12 years old. One day, the train stopped by a stream in order that the women might wash clothes. A great iron pot was filled with water and heated over a campfire. The numerous children in the train were playing about the fire and in some manner upset the pot of boiling water.

Jeff, the Indian boy, was the hero of the occasion. He jumped to the rescue and started tossing children left and right, out of the path of the spreading sheet of scalding water.

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Real "Covered Wagon" Pioneers
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"I'll never forget the excitement and the terror of that occasion," Mr. Pennebaker says.

At Carson City, Nevada, some of the members of the train split off to go into the Inyo County to mine, the rest coming over Tioga pass and into the San Joaquin valley to Visalia. The last camp before reaching Visalia late in the summer of 1868 was made on the Bass Parker ranch near Twin Buttes.

W. G. Pennebaker acquired a ranch on Cameron Creek north-west of Farmersville. In 1871, he purchased 160 acres of what is now the famous Giant Oak Ranch. Sherman Pennebaker believes a man named Nelson owned the ranch before his father bought it. There was a brick house on the west side of the creek, built of burned brick made from clay dug on the east side of the property which was once occupied by a family named Graham. This house was later moved down near the present Exeter-Farmersville highway and was used as a granary.

Mr. Pennebaker recalls that the old Los Angeles-Stockton wagon or stake road used to cross the ranch, and its route was still marked by a line of old telegraph poles which had carried the first wires through the valley. However, the road in 1871 had been changed to go east and west along the present route of the Exeter-Farmersville highway, then angled off south to Porterville.

Across the creek where the concrete structure is today was a bridge built of heavy oak beams. The beams of the span were narrow, says Mr. Pennebaker.

"When we had a load of hay or a header we couldn't cross the bridge but had to go to a ford about a quarter of a mile south. There was also one about three-quarters of a mile north of the bridge. One of these may have been the crossing for the old stage road," he says.

His father was, in those days, a sheep man and herded sheep over most of Tulare County, wherever there was feed and water.

"I was only seven years old, but I had to make a hand. I had a pony and my job was to keep track of the ewes with lambs."

"We had a camp on the present site of Tulare in 1873 right at the west entrance to the present fairgrounds. They were then building the railroad down from the north. We also had a camp near the Swall dehydrator that we called our Deep Creek camp. When we had a dry year, we took the sheep up to the foothills as far as Fountain Springs."

"Seventy-six and seventy-seven were dry years. My father sold his sheep for \$1 a head to a man who put up 25 cents a head down payment. The weather continued so dry that there was no feed and the purchaser forfeited the 25 cents."

"Then, Senator Tom Fowler, who had a ranch near Woodlake, bought the sheep, promising my father \$1 for every sheep he could deliver at the Kings River toll bridge, which was at the old town of Kingston. I helped my father deliver the sheep, and we left dead sheep along the trail all the way to Kingston. The only feed appeared to be the milkweed which grew green even in the driest weather. Of course, it was poisonous to sheep."

When W. G. Pennebaker acquired the Giant Oak ranch, it produced principally, weeds and cockleburrs, his son recalls. However, the land was cleared and the west side of the creek was planted to some of the first alfalfa ever grown in Tulare County. It sub irrigated from the high water table and did well. On the east side of the creek, the Pennebakers planted grain.

During these years the Pennebaker home was one of the best known places in this part of Tulare County and its hospitality was famous. It was the last place on the Visalia-Porterville road to get a drink of water after one left Farmersville until one reached Tule River. It was also a stopping place for people traveling between Yokohl Valley, then fairly well populated, and Visalia or Farmersville.

In 1891, the ranch was sold to Pinkham and McKeivitt, who developed it into the famous fruit producing ranch it remains to this day.

Sherman Pennebaker knew most of the historically famous old-timers of Tulare County, spent some time in his uncle's drug store in old Traver when it was the roughest town in the San Joaquin Valley, teamed in the mountains, helped on harvest crews, and had many other experiences highly interesting to those who enjoy hearing at first hand of the old days of the county.

Each edition will feature stories about our family members. We'd love to hear about you! Let us know what you've been up to. Articles could be autobiographical or tell us about the kids, grandkids or maybe about that big trip or the book you just had published. Send your story, with pictures if you wish, to the editor.

UPDATE ON KEN PANNABECKER

I retired from Lockheed Missiles and Space Co. on Feb.1, 1990 and my wife (Dee) retired from Elementary Teaching (Santa Clara Unified School District, Scott Lane School) a couple of years later. From 1983 to their deaths in 1991, my parents, Karl and Susie Pannabecker lived in our upstairs apartment.

Starting in 1978 I have been seriously involved in woodworking. Initially I did mostly staining and finishing for another woodworker. However, from time to time I 'helped' him and gradually acquired enough cabinet-making skills to feel comfortable with the building of projects on my own.

After some volunteer activity at the Slavic Gospel Church in Bellingham, WA we decided we'd like to make volunteering a part of our retirement life style. We also determined that a slightly more commodious trailer was imperative for that activity. We purchased a new travel trailer in 2000--one that had a 'separate' bedroom when one of us needed to rest before the other was ready to retire for the evening.

In late 2000 we joined the Mobile Missionary Assistance Program (MMAP) headquartered in Calimesa, CA. This program receives requests from Christian organizations (churches, schools, camps, etc.) and coordinates the assignment of its volunteers to the various projects across the country. Volunteer couples either own, or have unlimited access to some form of an RV, and are required to take a minimum of four three-week projects annually to maintain their membership. Many couples do more than the minimum, and some full-time RVers move from project to project!

Dee and I find that four projects are about all we can handle and still maintain a reasonable semblance of home life! (Last month we completed our 25th project since signing up.) I knew that I would enjoy the activity of volunteering, but was somewhat unprepared for the camaraderie and fellowship of like-minded persons. Since joining MMAP, we have worked mostly on the West Coast. We did take an assignment near Petoskey, MI; but after traveling that distance, Dee said to me, "You do realize we don't have to go 'cross-country' to

volunteer, don't you?"

As a MMAP volunteer, one is expected to accept whatever project assignment(s) that are consistent with MMAP's guidelines and one's own skill level. (Guidelines exclude steeply-pitched roofing, concrete work, and any other activity that might present out of the ordinary safety hazards.) Often when the project representatives learn that I am comfortable with cabinet building, they 'find' cabinet work for me! Early on I found the project-furnished tools to generally be inadequate in terms of precision and capability for cabinet making. Obviously I can't expect to find dedicated equipment equivalent to what I have in my own shop. However, over the years I have acquired smaller versions of the necessary tools, and when we head out on our assignments, I now carry everything needed for cabinet-making in our 'long-bed' pickup truck. Needless to say, it is rather heavily loaded!

FROM THE PRESIDENT RON MITCHELL

I'd like to express my thanks to those family members who put in the time to make this family association work. The names of the guilty can be found on the back of this newsletter. As you may have seen, the position of Vice President is vacant. John Pennabaker, has recently resigned this position due to health reasons. My special thanks to John for his dedicated assistance over the years. If anyone would like to be the new Vice President, please contact me.

Another big thank you goes out to all those members who have sent in their dues for the year. If you haven't sent me your dues, \$10 for an individual and \$17 for a family, please do so. Your renewal date is listed on the address label. Get out and enjoy those summer activities! Be safe and stay healthy!

Database

The Family Association does maintain an extensive genealogical database, compiled over many years by several dedicated family researchers. Since the database includes living individuals, we are reluctant to "give away" the entire database, or publish it on the Internet. However, we are willing to help those who have a specific question about their lineage. Please send requests for information to the editor of this newsletter.

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The Pannebakker Family Association is an out-growth of the family reunion held at Pennypacker Mills, Montgomery County, Pennsylvania on July 2-4, 1999. The reunion celebrated the 300th year wedding anniversary of Hendrick Pannebecker and Eve Umstat, in Germantown, Pennsylvania in the year 1699.

In the words of the Steering Committee of the reunion, "We hope that the 1999 Pfannebecker-Umstat Reunion will lead to the growth of a family association, which will provide a forum for conversation, collection and preservation of information, and a sense of lasting community among the heirs of this rich cultural heritage."

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