

Some Good Old Stories

Sometimes those of us who have been working with the history of our county for a long time forget that there are lots of people new to the area that don't know some of the favorite old stories from our county. Perhaps some of our museum docents are not familiar with some of these stories either and would be glad to add them to their repertoire.

Old Joe

"Everybody Liked That Horse"

The stage coach era lasted much longer than one might imagine given the rough and steep terrain in our county. In 1901 John McAnich of Auburn was still running the Auburn, Colfax and Forest Hill Stage Line. On July 3rd, driver Henry Crockett was heading to Forest Hill with passengers, a Wells Fargo box and a load of ice cream for the July 4th celebration the next day. Henry's team was led by "Old Joe" his favorite horse. The stage route was a difficult one and it was said that no one knew the route better than Old Joe. Passengers felt safe with him at the lead.

About seven miles from Forest Hill, after a steep 10-mile climb, a lone robber stopped the stage. He wore a mask and had sacks on his feet and carried a double barreled shotgun. The bandit ordered Crockett to throw out the Wells Fargo express box. Crockett is reported to have replied "Ah, go on, you're joshing." Some reports say he said "you must be foolin". Without a word, the robber shot Old Joe, killing him instantly. Crockett (again reportedly) shouted "You son of a b###, you've killed the best damn lead horse there is." Crockett threw out the box that contained about \$70 and the bandit collected about \$7.00 from the passengers. The bandit was never caught though he was later identified as Henry Wise, a former resident of Forest Hill who has served time in an Arizona jail for stage robbery.

On July 5th a group from Forest Hill came out to bury Old Joe. They put him in a sluice cut near the spot that he had died. About a year later Forest Hill residents placed a large slab of slate at the site to commemorate his passing. It was said that every fourth of July Forest Hill residents put a flag on Old Joe's monument. In the 1930's the slate slab was stolen and Ruhkala Monument Company of Rocklin donated a granite tombstone, when the Forest Hill road was widened in the 1990's, Old Joe was moved and in 2001 the Naive Sons of the Golden West erected a new monument with a wagon wheel atop it. Residents still frequently leave flags and flowers at Joe's grave site.

Driver Henry Crockett reportedly never forgot his favorite horse and as he continued to drive the stage route he regularly paused briefly at the grave site in memory of Old Joe. Sadly, Henry was killed in 1904 as he was picking up the mail from the Auburn Depot to deliver by stage to Forest Hill. He was hit by freight cars of the Southern Pacific. While the railroad company was found by a jury to have been "criminally careless" the company was never prosecuted.

Authors note – as with most old stories, much cannot be documented and they have perhaps been embellished over the years. The sources for this story include: Placer Herald July 1901, Sierra Heritage Fall 1986, Gold and Schemes by Bill Wilson pg. 178-179 and npr. org