

## **A man of history, community service**

**By Sabine Goerke-Shrode**

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This is the story of a man many folks in Solano County know. I have always felt very fortunate that I was lucky enough to count myself among Bert Hughes' many friends.

So what does this have to do with history? Read on.

Bert's great-great grandparents, Peter and Elizabeth Jane Baiz (Jenny) Wimmer, arrived at Sutter's Fort in California with the Harlan-Young wagon train in 1846. One of Jenny's children was among the first people buried at Sutter's Fort. Most importantly, they were major figures in the event that started the California Gold Rush.

Now I know that the Wimmer name isn't very familiar to most, but Peter and James Marshall were inspecting the ditch for Sutter's sawmill at Coloma when Marshall is reported to have picked up the first piece of gold that started the rush to California.

Jenny, who had done some gold mining during the earlier Georgia gold rush, tested the nugget in a pot of lye and declared that it was gold. The nugget was one of the first of several pieces of gold collected by James Marshall and Peter Wimmer.

The Wimmer Nugget now resides at the Bancroft Library. In documents accompanying the nugget, Jenny wrote, "They picked up a nugget of metal and Mr. Wimmer sent it to the house to me by our son and I boiled it in a kettle of soap all day to test it to see if it was gold. It proved to be a nugget of gold. From that the mining began."

Marshall later took the gold piece, weighing a little more than a quarter of an ounce, along with other samples he had discovered to Fort Sutter and "had it tested with acids and proved it to be pure gold," wrote Elizabeth Wimmer. Marshall presented her with the nugget as a memento of the great discovery and she carried it in a leather bag around her neck for the next 40 years.

The Smithsonian Museum has a slightly different version of the discovery and believes it has the first "nugget," a small, flattened piece about half the size of a pea. There is enough evidence available to dispute Smithsonian's claim of having the "first" nugget.

James Marshall went on to gather the accolades, monuments and a place in history and eventually died penniless and alone. The Wimmers went on to build a family based on hard work and honesty, but with little accurate mention in history.

Through the years, they worked the land, raised their families and taught them the virtue of honesty in dealing with others. Jenny died in early 1892 and is buried somewhere in Valley Center Cemetery north of San Diego.

Peter apparently caught a cold and died Aug. 15, 1892, at his sister's ranch near Cambria. They buried him on their ranch on York Mountain. A few years ago they relocated the road (California Highway 46) from Templeton to Cambria and Peter's grave was moved to a new location nearby.

Peter and Jenny's daughter, Sarah Marie, married Daniel Perry. Their second daughter was Bert's great-grandmother, Mary Ann Perry. She married George Washington Hughes. Their first son married Clista Haskell, Bert's mother.

From this union George Warren, Perry Raymond, Ruth Madeline and Bertram Augustus Hughes, were born on the Votypka Ranch near Rockville. Clista and George Hughes were divorced in the 1930s after about 17 years of marriage.

Bert and Ruth went to Oakland with their mother. Because of his asthma, Perry went to stay with his grandmother in Mendocino County. Warren remained in Fairfield with his father.

Bert's mother worked as a supervisor at a calculating machine company in Oakland. She later married her former husband's brother and eventually moved to Vacaville.

George Warren went on to become Vacaville's first paid fire chief and was responsible for the development of Vacaville's fire department as we know it today.

In an article on her 100th birthday, Bert and Warren's mother said, "I traveled through the daisies all the way." That statement implied an attitude prevalent in the Hughes family rather than an easy life. She died at the age of 102.

Bert likes to reminisce about the times he worked with his grandmother on his father's side, who worked as a cook at tan-bark and lumber camps in Mendocino County. The bark was processed into tannic acid and quite likely was used at the tannery once located at Benicia. Later he also worked at the Red Hill Gold Mine with his brother Perry.

In 1936 Bert married Dorothy Louise Mathews in Oakland. They moved to Vacaville in the early 1950s where they both became heavily involved in community affairs. Unfortunately, Louise began suffering with Alzheimer's disease in 1970. Bert took care of her until she died.

He continued to involve himself with community affairs and has become known as Solano County's premier historian. Unfortunately, space doesn't allow enough room to list all of his accomplishments, so I'll just list a few of them:

1. Instrumental in establishing the Vacaville Heritage Council.
2. Involved in the construction and early displays of the new museum.
3. Past president of the Solano County Historical Society.
4. Member and past president of the Solano County Historic Records Commission.
5. Guiding force for documenting historic buildings in Vacaville.
6. Guiding force in the publication of a very successful book listing historic buildings in Fairfield.
7. Assisted many authors in research for their books, including the Vacaville History book.
8. Assisted Kris Delaplane with Echoes of Solano County articles that appeared in The Reporter.
9. Won award of merit from the prestigious Conference of California Historical Societies for his contribution to the promotion and preservation of California history.
10. Key person in the building and running of the Vacaville Boys Club in the 1950s, and '60s. A multipurpose room was named after him.
11. Honored as a tireless community volunteer, he was appointed the 1984 Fiesta Days parade Grand Marshal.
12. Is often invited to give lectures at schools about Solano and Vacaville's history.

Bert recently suffered a stroke and is currently recovering at the Sunbridge/La Mariposa Convalescent Center in Fairfield. Constant parades of friends visit him daily, encouraging him on his road to recovery. His will is strong and we all look forward to having him back among us soon.

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