

Golden Nuggets

SACRAMENTO COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

September-October 2017, vol. 11-12

SCHS Presents Warren Truitt and George Nyberg

History of the American River Parkway

Tuesday, September 26, 7:00 PM (Doors Open 6:00)

Sierra Sacramento Valley Medical Society Building, 5380 Elvas Avenue, Sacramento



The “jewel” of Sacramento County—
the American River Parkway.

(Photo by Guy Galante)

Save the American River Association (SARA), a 501(c)(3) non-profit, was founded in 1961 to ultimately rally the greater Sacramento community to finally establish what is now the beloved “jewel” of Sacramento County—the American River Parkway. SARA sponsored two early bond measures to make the Parkway a reality for the community: In 1972 a successful \$12,500,000 bond measure to fund the purchase of the first 4,000 acres of the Parkway, as well to purchase Gibson Ranch and Elk Grove Park for the county; and, in 1978, SARA sponsored a second successful bond measure to remove the various sewage plants along the Lower American River and establish what is now the Sacramento Area Sewer District.

SARA continues today as the lead advocacy non-profit focused on protecting and preserving the American River and Parkway. SARA partici-

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SCHS Presents David Kulczyk

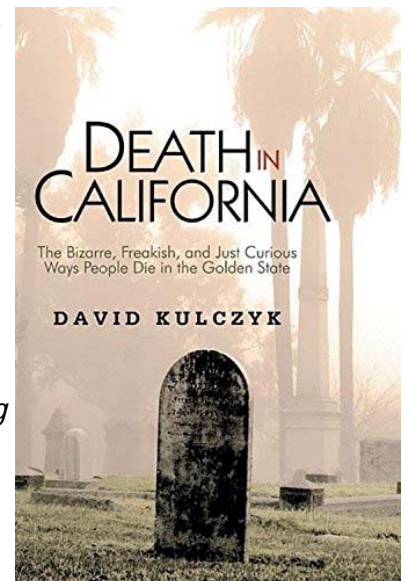
Forgotten Sacramento Murders

Tuesday, October 24, 7:00 PM (Doors Open 6:00)

Sierra Sacramento Valley Medical Society Building, 5380 Elvas Avenue, Sacramento

Sacramento-based crime historian, freelance writer, and award winning author of short fiction David Kulczyk gives a glimpse of his various books, including his second, *Death in California: The Bizarre, Freakish and Just Curious Ways People Die in the Golden State*. With details about grim and grisly fatalities, this history of California's arcane deaths explores the murders and accidents that at one time shocked the West Coast. Kulczyk will focus on Sacramento's many intriguing stories. Such as... the Murder at Old Ironsides:

Eugene Culver spent Tuesday, November 28, 1944 getting drunk as a skunk. The thirty-five-year old sugar factory employee got plastered at Old Ironsides at 10th and T Street, near his home at 1021 T Street. Culver had a criminal record in Sacramento dating back to 1925, when as a teenager he was arrested for pointing a pistol at a woman. Later he had various drunk and vagrancy charges filed against him. His November 28th binge was disgraceful. After annoying the customers at Old Ironsides all day, the evening found him stumbling around the neighborhood, yelling obscenities. Marie and Elmer “Skip” Skeie lived in the apartment above Old Ironsides. The forty-four-year old carpenter and his wife



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A History of the American River Parkway (continued from page 1)

pated in the preparation and establishment of the original American River Parkway Plan, which is codified in State law, as well as all subsequent updates. The 2008 version is the current governing document, which SARA frequently references, cites, and advocates for to assure the Parkway is protected and managed as intended.

SARA has led or participated in several efforts to protect the waters and lands of the American River Parkway, including a successful 20-year effort to prevent the East Bay Municipal Utility District from taking water at the Folsom South Canal, which could have turned the American into a creek on days water was taken. In addition, SARA stood up to efforts to transform Bushy Lake from Parkway habitat to additional entertainment venues and overflow parking for Cal Expo. SARA was also significantly involved in preserving the Fair Oaks Bluffs as a park as opposed to an intended luxury home development. In a nutshell, SARA is about preserving this incredible 6,000-acre community asset as envisioned as



The American River Parkway Plan is codified in State law.

(Photo by Guy Galante)

far back as visits from both Frederick Law Olmsted and his son, Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr.

Warren Truitt is a retired paper products distribution and legal publications executive, promoted to the position of General Manager of Zellerbach Paper Company and subsequently promoted to Central Valley Business Unit Manager, Crown Zellerbach Distribution Group. Warren spent his last twelve working years for legal publisher, Bancroft-Whitney (co-founded in 1886 by historian Hubert Howe Bancroft). Warren, who joined SARA in 2003, is currently vice-president and a past president.

George Nyberg is a retired writer/producer/director who managed the Television Communication Center at the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation for twenty years and

produced more than a dozen award winning video productions. George has been running, biking and kayaking in the American River Parkway for the past thirty years which is why he joined SARA.

Forgotten Sacramento Murders (continued from page 1)

were getting irritated at the asinine obscenities coming from outside of their window. Skip decided to go outside and do something about it.

It was a chilly forty degrees outside and a light rain misted down on Sacramento. Skip confronted Culver, who was now across the street from Old Ironsides. Words were exchanged and Skeie punched Culver in the face. Culver was knocked off his feet. Reaching into his pocket he pulled out a .22 target pistol and fired three shots at the fleeing Skeie. One bullet hit him in the back as he ran across T Street. Staggering into the front door of the bar, he yelled, "the drunk... the drunk," before he fell dead in front of the club. An hour later police found Culver at the notorious Monte Carlo tavern about ten blocks away. The pistol was found in his pocket with three spend bullets in the chamber.

The trial was quick. Culver told the court that he feared that Skeie was going to continue beating him, so he pulled out his pistol that he happened to have on him because he was on his way to a gun store to trade it for a shotgun so his step-son could use it for hunting. Culver said that he believed that the pistol was loaded with birdshot and not bullets, so he didn't think that he'd kill him. This makes no sense because a .22 caliber pistol fires a small bullet, and there would be hardly any room in the shell casing for more than a few BB's, which is what birdshot is. Culver was convicted and sentenced to one to ten years in San Quentin Prison.

Kulczyk was an Associate Editor at Maximum Ink Music Magazine from 1999 to 2007. His freelance work has appeared in numerous magazines and periodicals. He has BA in History from California State University, Sacramento. Other books by Kulczyk include *California's Deadliest Women: Dangerous Dames and Murderous Moms* (2016) *California's Fruits, Flakes and Nuts: True Tales of California Crazies, Crackpots and Creeps* (2013) and *California Justice: Shootouts, Lynchings and Assassinations in the Golden State* (2007).

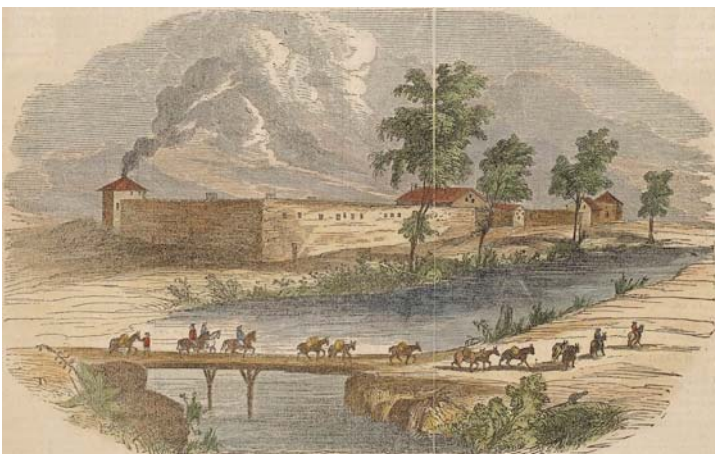
Twice Deceived: The Sad Story of Susan Biggerton McCoon

By Cheryl Anne Stapp

Those familiar with the saga of John Sutter will recognize the name Perry McCoon—a young man of perhaps dubious character. Although McCoon is now considered a minor historical figure, his talents in the heyday of Sutter's Fort were impressive enough to command \$2.00 per day in wages when the going rate was a dollar.¹ Soon, he was involved in enough of Sutter's agribusiness activities to merit frequent mention in the Fort's logbook, the *New Helvetia Diary*. In 1847 Perry McCoon married orphaned Elitha Donner, his second wife.² This is the recently discovered account of the first Mrs. McCoon, a young woman who first became unwillingly involved in Mexican California's domestic practices, and ultimately met a sad end.

Her name was Susan Biggerton. She came in the overland immigration of 1845, with a brother and sister, and a stepfather who deserted them on or before arrival in California. We don't know her age, probably sixteen or seventeen. We don't know the names of her stepfather or siblings, either, or the circumstances of this family group. Possibly, though this is conjecture, Susan's mother died on the trail, and at the first opportunity the unprincipled stepfather shed himself of what he considered a burden. At Sutter's Fort, Susan met an English sailor named William Lewis, about whom little is known—except that he deceived her.

Lewis told Susan that he owned a large ranch in Yerba Buena, filled with livestock; in other words, he



At Sutter's Fort, Susan Biggerton met an English sailor named William Lewis, about whom little is known—except that he deceived her.

(Engraving from Gleason's Pictorial Drawing Room Companion)

was rich. She, deserted and probably desperate, married him at the Fort on December 21, 1845.³ When the newlyweds arrived at the coast and Susan realized her bridegroom was in fact landless and penniless, she immediately left him, and was taken in by a sympathetic couple.

Lewis, though, was not so easily spurned; he wanted his wife back. Under Mexican law, marriages were only legal if performed by a Catholic priest, but John Sutter had officiated at the Lewis nuptials. Nonetheless, William Lewis took the stand that his marriage to Susan *was* legal. Also under Mexican law, divorce was not permitted. Should a couple want to separate, the priesthood and members of the community stepped in to effect a reconciliation, one tenet of which was to provide a "safe house" for the wife until the matter was settled.⁴

Lewis, who by now was seriously ill, acquired Robert Ridley as a spokesman—the same Robert Ridley who had once been the captain of Sutter's schooner—to try to force Susan into moving into the home of Juana Briones, where Lewis thought he could exert control over her. Ridley stormed the Clements' home with demands and threats. At this point, a beleaguered Susan appealed to William Leidesdorff, the U.S. Vice-Consul, for intervention on her behalf.

December 31, 1845

Sir,

I address these few lines to you to ask your advice. Having arrived here on Sunday and finding myself deceived and destitute, I took up my abode with Mr. and Mrs. Clements, they being kind enough to receive me. On Monday afternoon a person by the name of Ridley came and ordered me...to leave the house of my friends and protectors and to go and live at one of the country people. This evening Mr. Ridley and the Alcalde both came and told me I must...go to [a house] they may think fit to find me, and if I do not go tomorrow they will take me by force. I therefore ask your interference...and being a perfect stranger in this place and having a great dislike to the idea of living in a Spanish house as a Pris-

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*oner I hope you will advise me and assist me with your protection. Therefore I must await answer and remain your humble servant.*⁵

Susan Biggerton

Now the issue was thrust upon Leidesdorff, who interviewed Susan and did some further investigation, but had no wish to entangle himself in a situation that might offend Mexican sensitivities. The facts of Susan's abandonment by the stepfather, the brother and sister who remained at Johnson's Ranch, Ridley's demand that she move to the home of Juana Briones—where Lewis himself was living—and Lewis's infirmity, "he is so ill he can hardly stand," are in Leidesdorff's subsequent letters to sub-prefect of the Second District Franco Guerrero, and to U.S. Consul Thomas O. Larkin.

Larkin had no idea how to satisfactorily resolve the problem, either, as both his formal reply to Leidesdorff (not shown here), and his letter to John Sutter, both dated January 20, 1846, attest:⁶

I have for some time wished to write to you respecting your marrying citizens of the United States. I believe the Mexican laws admit of no marriages by her citizens unless a priest officiates. I am therefore afraid I am going to have future trouble from some of those you have joined as man and wife. The parties themselves will deny the legality when so inclined and will be supported in the belief...one young woman married by you in 1845, already denies the match [and] throws herself on this Consulate for protection. I do not know what to do in this case. Had she married to her liking, perhaps she would call the ceremony legal. As she is disappointed, she will not follow the man you married her to.

However, Larkin's letter to Sutter was likely irrelevant to the matter at hand by the time it was written, because William Lewis died in Yerba Buena on some unknown date in January. On January 30, 1846, the *New Helvetia Diary* records Susan's arrival by boat at the Fort; and on Thursday, February 5, 1846, records her marriage to Perry McCoon, with Sutter once again the officiator.⁷

There is no record of how and when Perry and Susan met and decided to marry. McCoon often sailed his own launch to Yerba Buena, a small village. It appears that he was there around the time Lewis died, and he and the widow were mutually attracted. In any case, their courtship was quick. On January 30, the day of Susan's arrival, the *New Helvetia Diary* also notes that "P. McCoon returned [from Yerba Buena] to be married."

Life as Mrs. McCoon was an economic improvement for Susan. Perry owned the ranch they lived on near the Cosumnes River, and he was gainfully employed. But Susan's need to find someone who would take care of her led her to misjudge a second man, for Perry was far from the best of husbands. He battered Susan, and when she miscarried in June, he took her to Sutter's Fort after hearing that a doctor was visiting.

The doctor was Marius Duvall, a U.S. Navy assistant surgeon assigned to the *Portsmouth*, anchored in San Francisco Bay. Dr. Duvall badly wanted to meet explorer John Charles Frémont, who was thought to be in the vicinity of Sutter's Fort, so he sailed upriver in a small boat with a few fellow officers. The following are excerpts from his journal:⁸



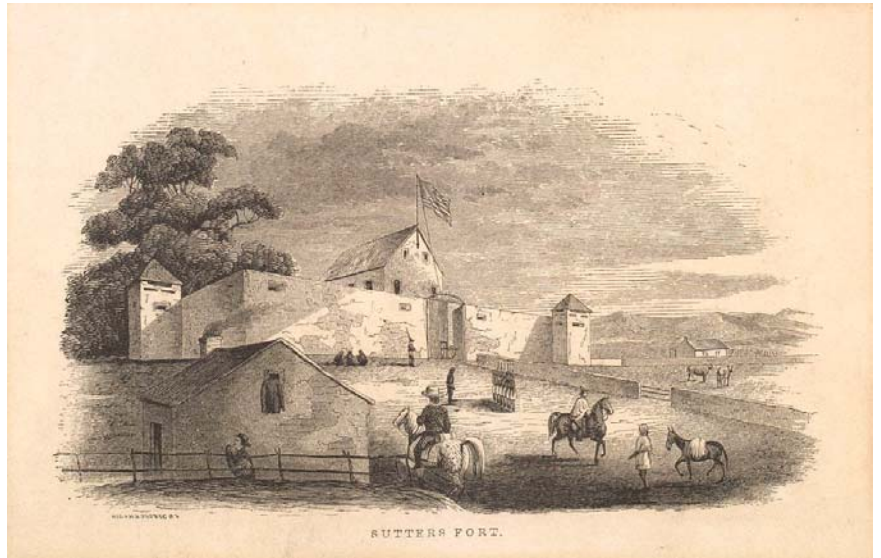
**William Lewis died in Yerba Buena on some unknown date
In January 1846, and Susan was remarried to
Perry McCoon on February 5 of that year.**

*("San Francisco in November 1848"; Lithograph of
Sorony and Major; from a sketch by J.C. Ward, Esq.)*

(continued on page 5)

Today (June 14) I was called to pay a professional visit to the wife of an American, a Mr. Perry who having heard that a doctor had arrived in the neighborhood, has brought his wife 20 miles to see him. [sic]

June 15 - This morning I [found my patient] much improved. I felt a good deal of interest and sympathy for this woman. She was young and pretty, had endured all the hardships [of a passage across the Rocky Mountains], had the remains of several wounds on her forehead, had just given birth to a human being, and was now suffering from a burning fever.



Susan Biggerton McCoon died at Sutter's Fort on June 24, 1846 and was buried that day.

(Engraving by J.H. Richardson)

Duvall does not say that the birth occurred in his presence; likely it was a spontaneous abortion that happened before he saw her. His use of the odd phrase "just given birth to a human being" can be interpreted to mean that Susan told him the fetus was formed but not viable. Her symptoms indicate puerperal fever, a bacterial infection caused by lack of sanitation during childbirth. Yet it was Perry's beating that brought on the miscarriage, obliquely stated in Dr. Duvall's journal, though more explicitly so in the doctor's personal letter to a friend.

Duvall briefly saw Susan again on June 16, before his short meeting with Frémont. Then, assuming she was on the mend, he returned to his ship and forgot all about her in the midst of the excitement aroused by the audacious Bear Flag Rebellion.

Susan Biggerton McCoon died at Sutter's Fort on Wednesday June 24, 1846, and was buried that day. Following his spectacular success at gold-mining in the summer of 1848, Perry McCoon lapsed into more or less habitual drunkenness. In 1851, an unbroken horse bucked him from the saddle and dragged him to his death.⁹

Langum uses this incident, citing Susan's letter to Leidesdorff, plus the subsequent correspondence between Leidesdorff and Larkin, to discuss customary Mexican procedures regarding the separation of married couples. He did not know that Susan later married Perry McCoon. For this connection, see footnote 7.

⁵ George P. Hammond, editor, *The Larkin Papers* Vol. IV. Bancroft Library, 1953. Someone else, probably the Clements, composed this letter, because Susan merely sketched an "x" after her name. Also see Bancroft, Vol. 4, *Pioneer Register*: "Biggerton, Susan, 1845; illegally married at Sacramento [Sutter's Fort]—or so wrote Wm. Leidesdorff." Hubert Bancroft, *History of California*. San Francisco: The History Company, 1886.

⁶ *The Larkin Papers*, Vol. IV.

⁷ Letter from Sutter to Pierson Reading dated February 8, 1846: "The last Thursday I married Perry with the widow of William Lewis, which [sic] died a few days after his arrival at Yerba Buena." J.A. Sutter Correspondence to P.B. Reading April 24, 1844 to May 11, 1846, typescript by Lucinda M. Woodward, 1981. *New Helvetia Diary*, dates as noted.

Fred B. Rogers, editor. *A Navy Surgeon in California 1846-1847, the Journal of Marius Duvall*. San Francisco: John Howell, 1957. Also, Sutter's Fort Archives.

⁹ *New Helvetia Diary*, date as noted. Heinrich Lienhard's criticism of McCoon in his memoir *A Pioneer at Sutter's Fort, 1846-1850*, translated from German by Marguerite Wilber. Los Angeles: The Califa Society, 1941. McCoon's death is cited in several sources.

¹ *New Helvetia Diary* October 15, 1845. Published by Society of California Pioneers. Grabhorn Press, 1939.

² Sutter's Fort Archives, *alcalde* John Sinclair's Marriage Book.

³ *New Helvetia Diary* December 21, 1845: "Wm. Lewis & Miss [blank space where the bride's name should be] were married."

⁴ Attorney David J. Langum published Susan Biggerton's domestic travails with William Lewis in "Expatriate Domestic Relations Law in Mexican California," *Pep-Perdine Law Review* December 15, 1979, pp. 53-54.



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GOLDEN NUGGETS

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 September to June

OUT & ABOUT

DATE	TIME	EVENT	PLACE & CONTACT
Sun Sep 17	10 AM - 4 PM	<i>Preservation Sacramento Historic Home Tour</i> Featuring the Historic Alkali Flat Neighborhood The Alkali Flat neighborhood contains Sacramento's first residential historic district to be listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Bounded by the Southern Pacific railroad tracks, 7th, I, and 12th streets, Alkali Flat's earliest and most important surviving buildings are contained within the historic district, but there are many significant buildings and infill projects surrounding the district that will be interesting for attendees of the tour.	Preservation Sacramento 916-202-4815 www.preservationsacramento.org/hometour/ Tickets available online and at select locations. See website for details.
Tue Sep 26	7 PM	<i>History of the American River Parkway</i> SCHS presents Warren Truitt and George Nyberg, representing Save the American River Association, who will discuss the history of the preservation movements associated with the American River Parkway.	Sierra Sac Valley Medical Museum 5380 Elvas Ave, Sacramento 916-452-2671 Doors open at 6 PM
Tue Oct 24	7 PM	<i>Death in California</i> To get you in the Halloween mood, SCHS presents author David Kulczyk, discussing his newest book, <i>Death in California: The Bizarre, Freakish and Just Curious Ways People Die in the Golden State</i>	Sierra Sac Valley Medical Museum 5380 Elvas Ave, Sacramento 916-452-2671 Doors open at 6 PM