

# RANCHO BODEGA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## Little Buckhorn Ranch

*by Robin Rudderow - 2016*

Little Buckhorn Ranch, a 446 acre ranch on Coleman Valley Road, was first a part of the 35,000 acre Rancho Bodega, then a part of the nearly 4,000 acre coastal Buckhorn Ranch owned by WSM Wright. Little Buckhorn was carved into its current configuration sometime before 1877, and its first owner was land man Hollis Hitchcock. It is likely that the North Coast Pacific Railroad next owned Little Buckhorn, and sold it to James Coleman in the 1880's.

I was contacted for information by the family of the current owners of Little Buckhorn Ranch, and found this a wonderful opportunity to use our great archival resources. Learning about Little Buckhorn Ranch and the surrounding ranches swept me up into the early days of Rancho Bodega when Captain Steven Smith allowed settlers to live on his land and make it productive, and then helped them get their products to market on his ships that plied the seas between Bodega Port and the growing San Francisco.

**RANCHO BODEGA ENJOYED HARMONY .. UNTIL THE WAR IN 1859.** Captain Smith's 1855 death and the remarriage of his wife, Manuela, to the scheming Tyler Curtis, brought an end to the harmony of Rancho Bodega, with Curtis evicting Captain Smith "squatters", as Curtis called them. The December 1857 eviction lawsuit by Tyler Curtis named fifty eight defendants, including Hollis Hitchcock and James Coleman, who had built homes and ranches on Rancho Bodega lands. WSM Wright was not named as a defendant because he bought his land from Stephen Smith's Estate. In March 1859, Curtis got judgment on a writ of ejectment by default, but the settlers refused to move.



## LITTLE BUCKHORN RANCH

In June 1859, the “Bodega War”, where “nary a shot was fired,” saw Curtis trying to take the law into his own hands with a band of armed roughs from San Francisco. While Curtis and his militia were sent packing, Curtis ultimately prevailed in his eviction action, and in short order parcels were surveyed and sold, and the patchwork quilt across Rancho Bodega of individual ranches was started.

**RANCHO BODEGA IS CARVED INTO CATTLE RANCHES and LOGGING OPERATIONS.** Winfield Scott Mullen Wright (“WSM”, 1822 - 1892) was a ‘49er from Missouri. He was married in 1845 to Sarah Boone, the granddaughter of Daniel Boone. WSM and Sarah had two children, Sampson Boone and Olive Mahala. After Sarah died in 1859, WSM married Jarena Brown Clark, a widow. After a year in California, WSM went home and came back to California in 1853 with his family and his parents and 400 head of cattle. WSM first purchased the Wright family homestead, “Wright Ranch”, located at Stony Point and Sebastopol Roads. In approximately 1857 WSM bought nearly 4,000 acres of coastal ranch land, stretching from what we now know as Wright’s Beach to the Russian River. WSM called his coastal ranch “Buckhorn”. A “buckhorn” is the horn of a deer, used typically to make knife handles, small containers, or rifle sights.

**A GAMBLING DEBT CREATES A GEM: LITTLE BUCKHORN RANCH.** The story is that WSM incurred a gambling debt to Hollis Hitchcock sometime prior to 1877, so WSM deeded 446 acres of Buckhorn Ranch to Hollis, to create “Little Buckhorn Ranch.”



**Hollis Hitchcock** was born in 1822, probably in Vermont, and he later moved to Quebec, then to California. Hollis came to the Bodega area in 1856 looking for pasturage for his stock, and stayed becoming a significant land investor. Hollis and his wife Amelia, divorced in 1875, and they did not have children. By the time of Hollis’ death in 1896 he owned approximately 20 ranches in the Bodega area, plus more in Sonoma, Mendocino, Marin, Solano and Monterey Counties. The beneficiaries of his estate were a brother, two sisters, and numerous nieces and nephews who were the children of deceased brothers and a sister. Described in the 1892 Register as 5' 4 ½" and farmer from Freestone, Hollis was known to be a tough



business man and stickler for collecting rent from his tenants. Yet in his Will he showed his appreciation for his community by leaving \$20,000 in trust for construction and improvement of the roads in the Bodega Township. The gravesite of Hollis Hitchcock is an elaborate memorial set in the beautiful Bloomfield cemetery. If you haven't been to the cemetery, it is worth a visit.

While the 1877 Atlas shows Little Buckhorn Ranch was owned by Hollis Hitchcock, the 1898 Atlas shows it was owned by Mary Coleman, the widow of James Coleman. James P. Kolmer, later known as Coleman, was born in Dublin, Ireland in 1825. He came first to Philadelphia in about 1845, then to San Francisco in 1850 via the Isthmus of Panama. James married Mary Knowland, also born in 1825 in Ireland. The Coleman Family left San Francisco in 1857 and bought a 1000 acre ranch known as the Coleman Hill Ranch, located between Occidental and the coast, near where Fitzgerald Lane meets Joy Road. Their home was a three-story mansion on a knoll with a beautiful view of the ocean, which burned to the ground in November 1905. James ran a large dairy, and shipped butter to San Francisco by boat. Honoria Tuomey (History of Sonoma County, p. 948) described James: "he showed a progressive and practical spirit, his judgment and sound common sense being evident in everything he did. His name was appropriately given to the valley, his prominence and worth being recognized and appreciated by his fellow citizens."

**A NEW CENTURY, A NEW LIVELIHOOD IN LOGGING: THORPE FAMILY SAW MILL.** James Coleman's second ranch was then known as the Sutherland Ranch, now known as Chanslor Ranch. When James owned it, it was a 437 acre dairy ranch. In 1871 James leased a portion to John Genazzi, and the rest of the ranch was occupied by N. Keefe. Hollis Hitchcock took over Sutherland Ranch in 1877.

While no transfer of ownership of Little Buckhorn from Hollis Hitchcock to the railroad has yet been found, Ruth Burke (An Intimate History of Bodega Country, p. 461) says the Coleman Family bought Little Buckhorn from the railroad. In the 1880's the North Coast Pacific Railroad built a 5.14 mile spur up Willow Creek from the Russian River (the spur ceased operation sometime before 1907). Little Buckhorn Ranch was just south and over the hill from the Willow Creek spur. One stage coach road ran through Little Buckhorn from Joy Road to the Russian River ferry and another zigzagged over the hill from Little Buckhorn to Willow Creek. In later years Little Buckhorn was a stagecoach stop, perhaps a hotel.

James Coleman died in 1890, his wife Mary died in February 1905. The second of their nine children, Jenny (1858-1927), married James Thorpe (born in Ireland 1851, died in Occidental in 1935). The Thorpe Family took over Little Buckhorn Ranch after Mary died and operated a sawmill there from 1923 to 1927. Ruth Burke described the operation: "James Thorpe was the sawyer at the mill. Joe Coleman [last child of James and Mary, 1872 - 1926], Bill Thorpe and son, Jimmy, ran the 'donkey' (steam side spool engine) and high lines to move longs to the mill. Charles Thorpe ran the trimmer. Amanda [wife of Bill Thorpe] ran the edger when no one else was available, as well as the carriage at times, plus delivering lumber to customers. Charles did the bookkeeping. They had a Fageol truck to haul lumber, longs, etc. Jimmy drove it when he was nine or ten years old. The highline came from Austin Creek woods. It was hauled home in the Fageol truck and dragged behind from Occidental to the mill to get the kinks out of it, also to get it cleaned up and polished. The steam engine and the 'donkey' came from Bob Bittner's mill on Battle Ridge in 1923. The 50-horse power motor came from Meeker's mill and the little 30-horse power motor was from Kenwood."

Gone are the dairy cattle, the whistle of the train, the echoes of the steam donkey and saw mill, the dusty stagecoach. The beautiful Rancho Bodega hills surround Little Buckhorn Ranch as the fog rolls in and whispers stories of bygone days

In preparing this article I was put in contact with a descendant of WSM and Sarah Boone, who grew up on Buckhorn Ranch and has wonderful stories to tell. I will share more about the Wright family in my next column. [rbhs@bodegamoon.net](mailto:rbhs@bodegamoon.net)