

RANCHO BODEGA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

A Remarkable Woman Named Rose

by Ginny Magan - 2008

In the late nineteenth century, the land known as Bodega Head comprised four ranches individually owned by John Campbell, James Kee, Andrew Johnson, and Irish immigrants Miles and Catherine Gaffney.

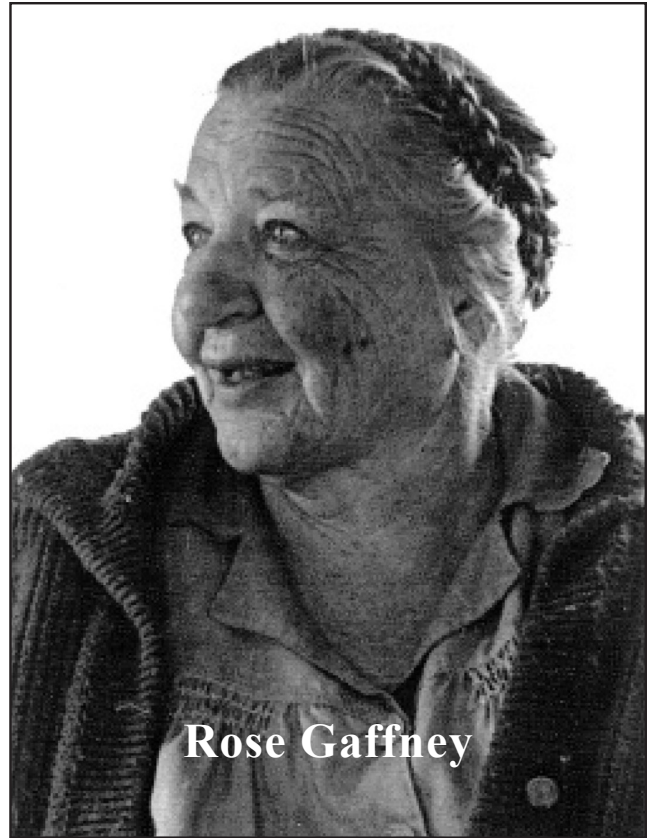
Rose Gaffney, born in 1895, was the daughter-in-law of Miles and Catherine, though neither lived long enough to know the vigorous woman who would marry their third-born son. Often described as feisty and, less flatteringly, as stubborn, crusty, or prickly, Mrs. Gaffney was, of course, much more complex than her well-known image implied. A wise and well-read woman, she possessed a myriad of interests including archeology, biology, geology, and local history. Her collection of Indian artifacts was legendary. "I never will find all the time I want and need to do all the things I'd like to do," she once wrote.

An eight grade drop-out who obviously didn't need, or didn't have the means to acquire, what conventional academia had to offer, Gaffney believed that "the biggest asset of a college education is that it teaches you a persistence ... if only persistence enough ... to complete that much study."

Neither was she interested in traveling beyond the Sonoma County coast she loved ("I don't want to see the world ... I don't have to go around the world to find adventure.") Her inspiration and excitement were found in the natural world outside her door. In a letter written to a friend in 1972, Rose Gaffney reported in her characteristic train-of-thought style: "Beautiful here today, clouded skies, but the sun is shining and the cloud formation is exciting, so varied ... discloses such weird air current ... a perpetual DISNEYLAND...(a) new program, something different to see every minute of every day. Guess I haven't grown up. The world still thrills me with its mysteries and wonders."

Little is known of the earliest years of Rose Schmidt Gaffney's life. Most sources say she was born in 1895 in Russian ruled Poland and immigrated with her family when Rose, the youngest of seven, was three years old. The Schmidt family probably settled in Vacaville. Ruth Burke, a lifelong resident of Bodega and a Gaffney family fiend, credit's Rose's father with kindling his young daughter's interest in archeology when he showed her an ancient stone knife found at a nearby building site.

Rose Schmidt was married to her first husband, T. H. Walsh, had lost an infant son, and was working on the 462-acre Gaffney ranch by the time she was sixteen. Rose and her husband moved to Windsor, where daughter Ellen was born in 1914.



Rose Gaffney

ROSE GAFFNEY

But for reasons unknown, she was soon drawn back to the place she would always love, and in 1917, twenty-two-year-old Rose Schmidt Walsh married Bill Gaffney. One of nine children, Bill Gaffney had lived most of his life at the family's ranch on the rugged coastline of Bodega Bay. He was forty-nine years old when he married Rose and adopted three-year-old Ellen.

The two spent the next sixteen years raising Ellen and working the relatively isolated ranch. In 1933 they retired to their cottage in the nearby village of Salmon Creek and leased out the ranch. For a short time in 1941, Doris and Guy Mann, Jr. lived in the Gaffney's ranch house, which Guy Mann, Sr. had leased starting in the late 1930s.

Doris, Guy and one-year-old Ina were sometimes invited to share a pancake supper with the Gaffneys at their Salmon Creek cottage, and Doris Mann has memories of Rose's excellent jelly and jam, tells of her frugal nature, her wide variety of interests, and the overgrown but exuberant flower garden on the south side of the house, and especially remembers "the love and respect (she) showed for her elderly husband." Seventy-three year old Bill Gaffney was milking a cow when he died suddenly in 1941. He left the ranch on Bodega Head to his forty-six-year-old widow.

Recalled by Ruth Burke as "a kind and gentle friend with a sense of humor," a strong will, and an honest and forthright manner, Rose Gaffney is probably most widely known as the thorn in the side of PG&E (whose representatives probably didn't experience her kind and gentle side).

When the Pacific Gas and Electric Company revealed plans to build a nuclear power plant on Bodega Head, they soon encountered the strong will and forthright manner Mrs. Burke remembers, and the persistence that Gaffney didn't need to attend college to acquire. Strongly opposed to the utility company's plan, Rose Gaffney ran officers off her land and rallied forces, writing letters, and speaking to whomever would listen. Joined at first by local residents and later by citizens of the greater Bay Area and beyond, Mrs. Gaffney played a large part in winning what came to be called the Battle of Bodega Bay.



PG&E's plans were eventually abandoned, and Rose Gaffney was pronounced the Mother of Ecology by the Los Angeles Times. Suddenly the woman who didn't care to "see the world" was receiving fan mail from Korea and Japan. The pronouncement of the Times was apt. Two years before she died Gaffney wrote to a friend; "I wasn't really battling PG&E when I started the Battle of Bodega Head. I was battling the RAPE OF THE TIDELANDS, and I am still at that battle - it isn't over yet."

Ginny Magan is Editor of The Bulletin, the Tomales Regional History Center newsletter. This article was adapted from a theme issue about pioneer women published in April 2007 and is run with permission from TRHC.