

FROM THE ARCHIVES by Robin Rudderow

Little Buckhorn Ranch

Little Buckhorn Ranch, a 446-acre ranch on Coleman Valley Road, was part of the original 35,000 acre Rancho Bodega Land Grant from Mexico. Carved from coastal Buckhorn Ranch, owned by WSM Wright, Little Buckhorn was formed sometime before 1877. The first owner was a land man named Hollis Hitchcock. It is likely the next owner was the North Coast Pacific Railroad, using train tracks to haul logs and goods to coastal boat landings and onto San Francisco. After the Railroad's short tenure, James Coleman became owner 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 into the early days of Rancho Bodega when Captain Stephen Smith allowed settlers to live on his land and make it productive. He 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 1847. Captain Smith's 1855 death and the remarriage of his wife Manuela to the scheming Tyler Curtis, brought an end to harmony in Rancho Bodega, when Curtis evicted Captain Smith's "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. In March 1859, Curtis received judgment in his favor on the eviction action, but the settlers refused to move. Three months later the "Bodega War" erupted where "nary a shot was fired," when Curtis tried to take the law into his own hands with a band of armed ruffians from San Francisco. Curtis and his militia men were sent packing, but Curtis ultimately prevailed. In short order, land parcels were surveyed and sold; and the patchwork quilt across Rancho Bodega of individual ranches was started.



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RANCHO BODEGA IS CARVED INTO CATTLE RANCHES and LOGGING OPERATIONS. WSM Wright was not named as a defendant in the eviction proceedings because he bought his land from Capt. Smith's Estate. Winfield Scott Mullen Wright ("WSM" 1822-1892) was a '49er from Missouri, married in 1845 to Sarah Boone, granddaughter of frontiersman Daniel Boone. WSM and Sarah had two children, Sampson Boone and Olive Mahala. After a year in California, WSM returned to Missouri and came back to settle in California in 1853 with his young family, his parents and 400 head of cattle. First, he purchased his family homestead further inland, named "Wright Ranch," located at Stony Point and Sebastopol Roads. Then, c1857, 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. After his wife Sarah died in 1859, WSM then married a widow, Jarena Brown Clark.



Hollis Hitchcock



Hollis Hitchcock Memorial - Bloomfield Cemetery

A GAMBLING DEBT CREATES A GEM: LITTLE BUCKHORN RANCH. The 1877 Atlas shows Little Buckhorn Ranch was owned by Hollis Hitchcock. The story goes that WSM incurred a gambling debt to Hitchcock, one of Tyler Curtis' evicted settlers. To pay off his debt WSM deeded 446 acres of Buckhorn Ranch to Hollis, creating the "Little Buckhorn Ranch."

Hollis Hitchcock was born in 1822, probably in Vermont, later moved to Quebec, and then to California. Hollis came to Bodega at the age of 34 looking for pasturage for his cattle stock and became a significant land investor. Described in the 1892 Register as a short man at 5' 4 1/2" and farmer from Freestone, Hollis was known to be a tough businessman and stickler for collecting rent from his tenants. Hitchcock married Amelia and divorced in 1875 leaving no children. By the time of Hitchcock's 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. Perhaps surprisingly, 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. *(continued next page)*

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Ports and the Railroad Make Rancho Bodega a Hub

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.

The next good piece of evidence, the 1898 Atlas, shows Little Buckhorn Ranch being owned by Mary Coleman, the widow of James Coleman. Coleman "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." (source: Honoria Tuomey, *History of Sonoma County*, p. 948)

James P. Kolmer, later known as Coleman, was born in Dublin, Ireland in 1825. He arrived in Philadelphia at age twenty, then to San Francisco in 1850 via the Isthmus of Panama. James married Mary Knowland, born the same year as her husband in their Irish homeland. 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.

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 Chanslor Ranch. When Coleman owned it, it was a 437-acre dairy ranch. In 1871 James leased a portion to John Genazzi, when the rest of the ranch was occupied by N. Keefe. Hollis Hitchcock took over Sutherland Ranch in 1877, after he had acquired Little Buckhorn Ranch. James Coleman died in 1890; his wife Mary in February 1905. The second of their nine children, Jenny (1858-1927) married James Thorpe (born in Ireland 1851, died in Occidental in 1935).

After mother Mary died, the Thorpe Family took over Little Buckhorn Ranch and operated a sawmill 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 logs 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 (built in Oakland) to haul lumber, logs, 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. -- Robin Rudderow 2016