

The Wonacott Family

California Pioneers

By Carol Backert

In November 1849, when the Manly party was on the trail to what is now Death Valley in Inyo County, California, there was born in Virginia, a boy who would later to play a substantial part in developing the northern part of that same county. Charles William Wonacott was born in Richmond, Virginia on November 8, 1849. Little is known of his boyhood, but on June 16, 1872 in St Clair, Missouri, he married Miss Rachel Huckaby.

They lived for a time in Osage, Missouri and their first child Frank was born. They were not very prosperous in Osage and, tales which came to them of the farmland available in eastern California made them yearn to try their fortune in the new country. So when Rachel's brother George Huckaby was married to Emily Smith, the bride and groom together with their parents the Joseph Smiths and the Hiram Huckaby's and young Charles and Rachel Wonacott all started together for California leaving Fort Scott, Kansas on May 2, 1874. In the excitement of packing for her wedding trip, Emily, then only fifteen years of age forgot the hoops for her hoop skirts, which indeed was a tragedy for a young bride.

The journey was difficult, and baby Frank became ill with fever. Besides, Rachel was now expecting her second child, and so the Wonacott's stopped in Laramie, Wyoming while the others pressed on to California. Charles and Rachel stayed for a year or more in Laramie and there their daughter Carrie was born and little Frank died.

Finally they resumed their trip and reached Bishop in November of 1875 or in 1877. (There is a difference of opinion as to the year.) Their first home was a cabin where the J. C. Penney Store now stands. They moved to a cabin on the old Mallory Ranch and their second son Don L. Wonacott was born there. (Later, the cabin was used to house pigs).

The elder Huckaby's and Smiths eventually settled on adjoining ranches on the north side of what now is called Dixon Lane. In these early days when the mines were booming there was much hauling to be done from the mining areas. Charles Wonacott spent some time teaming between Candelaria and Carson City and Bishop.

For a while they lived in Murphy's in Calaveras County where he built the steps down to the Mercer Caves, which were discovered by a Mr. Mercer, a relative of the Matlick family. It was during this period, on October 18, 1886 that their son Albert Warren (Bob) was born.

Charles was a carpenter and a building contractor by trade. His first work in the valley was that of a building in West Bishop the Spencer Store, which was a well-known establishment at one time. He built the West Bishop schoolhouse, and when it was destroyed by fire, he built another to replace it. This structure is now being used as a Presbyterian Church for the Indians. Many of the bridges around this area were built by him, as was the old grammar school, which now houses the Bishop 2 fire department and city offices. He was one of the carpenters for the Butler Home where Edna Butler now resides, and he was a contractor for the old Bulpitt building on the site where Joseph's store is now located, although he himself did not do the stone work on the edifice.

For years the family lived on the ranch on West Bishop Lane where the Clarkson's now reside (usually called the Nelligan ranch.) Mr. Wonacott planted in front of the house two little pine trees, which are still there. The Eldred family lived across the street from them there, and the Wonacott and

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Eldred children were reared together. Don, Forrest and Carrie attended the West Bishop School, which their father had constructed.

The Keoughs also were close friends of the Wonacott's. In fact when Mrs. Keoughs passed away, Rachel Wonacott was with her to the end. The two families particularly enjoyed making camping trip together up Bishop Creek. For four or five years they celebrated the 4th of July holiday in this way.

The Wonacott family now moved to the ranch of Rachel's parents, the Huckaby's, and when Mr. Huckaby passed away, Charles Wonacott bought his brother-in-law George Huckaby's inherited share of the ranch, part payment being a team at horses, which was a favorite the family. There was no school bus in those days, and the Wonacott children walked to school in Bishop and back. One of Carrie's dear friends at school was Eva McGee Yaney. Mamie Clark was Carrie's teacher when Carrie graduated from the 8th grade. She graduated from the Bishop Academy also.

Bob Wonacott attended the Riverside school where Katie Arcularius Watterson was his teacher. This school had several locations, class being held in houses donated for the purpose until Charles Wonacott gave the county an acre of his land to be used for a school as long as it was needed. A school was built on this site and was used until the attendance was insufficient to maintain it. Florence Huckaby Smith walked all the way from her house in Laws to attend it after she and the teacher at the Laws School had some differences. Grace Patterson Schively. Evelyn Gunter Neill and Mrs. Mabel Amon were others who taught there.

While building was his primary occupation, Charles Wonacott found time to engage in other enterprises and in civic affairs. He, Phil Keough, Dick Eldred and John Bulpitt were the first to stock Ray Lake above Big Pine with trout. They carried the fish up to the lake in cans on the backs of donkeys. He, Charlie Garrison and John Bulpitt started a sawmill in the Owen river gorge. They logged the county in the vicinity of the Casa Diablo mine with George Huckaby in charge of the logging operation. The logs were slid into the river by a shoot and floated down to the sawmill. From the mill the limber was again raised to the top of the gorge by horse tram, and teamed to its destination. The mill was operated only during the summer months and as soon as school was dismissed, Rachel moved to the camp on top to cook for the loggers. There was another cookhouse in the gorge. All the water for the upper camp was brought up in, barrels on the tramway.

With the sudden rapid growth of Tonopah Charles Wonacott took his 12-year-old son Bob with him to that town where he started a lumberyard and engaged in the building business. Later he took in as a partner, George Hall of Big Pine. In those days there was nobody to take care of the dead, and it fell to the carpenters to make wooden coffins which were covered with anything available. So carpentry led them into the undertaking business and they built a mortuary.

Bob spent two years there teaming, and then he returned to Bishop, and his mother, his sisters Vangie, Hattie, and his brothers. Harold and Dwight went to Tonopah. Bob and his brothers Forrest and Don (who had a threshing outfit with Charlie Olds. Sr.) stayed in the family home and teamed around Bishop and Big Pine principally hauling hay to the railroad at Laws to be sent to Sodaville and Tonopah. After two years of this Bob returned to Tonopah where he attended school and helped his father in the lumberyard and undertaking parlor. Later his father purchased a horse drawn taxi from a Reno man, and for a couple of years Bob was its driver.

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Charles bought out George Hall and later Frank J. Cavanaugh became his partner in the mortuary, which still bears their names. Years later Charles Wonacott sold his interest in the building to Cavanaugh and when Wonacott passed away his old friend came from Tonopah to conduct his services.

Rachel did not like the wild, dirty boomtown and after four years there, she returned to her Bishop home. In 1908 Charles joined her, driving into town, as his daughter recalls driving a fine gray team.

Charles Wonacott was always ready to take his share of public responsibility. He served on the Board of Trustees on both the elementary and the high school. For two terms he was a member of the Board of Supervisors of Inyo County. The roads of that day had no surface but natural dirt and despite constant use of plough and horse drawn grader, the roads were rough and always in need of repair. Charles Wonacott believed that if the roads were surfaced with gravel they would last much longer, and so he proposed that the Board of Supervisors purchase a road roller run by a gasoline engine. The rest of the Board did not think that the plan would prove satisfactory, and to prove to them its worth, Charles himself bought the equipment. After seeing the machinery work they were convinced of its practicality and reimbursed him for it. The roads built with crushed rock held their surface many times longer than the dirt surfaced roads, and the equipment was used by Inyo County for many years.

In 1915, the *Inyo Register* reported, the Board of Supervisors voted to have a quarantine corral built at the Laws railroad station and Charles Wonacott was put in charge of the project. It was completed shortly and is still standing though now rarely used.

Charles Wonacott was a jolly, kindly man, happy-go-lucky and fond of teasing his friends and family. He loved children and was the father of nine. He was interested in the activities of the Methodist Church and both he and his daughter Carrie sang in the choir. He was a loyal member of the Elks Club of Bishop and the large elk tooth which hung on his generous chest was a familiar trinket which fascinated his young grandchildren. He was fond of animals too. Once after he had retired and had some leisure time, he was given a magpie that someone had caught. He tamed it, split its tongue and taught it to talk, and trained it so that when he would go out on the porch and call the bird; it would fly to him perch on his shoulder and peck at his ear or the elks tooth, or search in his pocket for the cracker, which he would hide there. He was a very heavy man and many of his descendents have the same tendency toward obesity.

Rachel was more reserved than her husband. She was a neat housekeeper, thrifty, and a meticulous person. She loved to entertain large groups of her family and neighbors, and on occasions thirty or more would gather for family dinners. Her home was always open to everyone. Kate Boyd one of the neighbors and she particularly enjoyed having in her home.

Their family became closely related to the Thompson family by marriage. In fact three Wonacott boys were engaged to marry three Thompson girls. Don Wonacott married Maggie Thompson and Bob Wonacott married Carrie Thompson. The third marriage was prevented by a tragedy. Forrest Wonacott was soon to marry Jennie Thompson. At that time, about 1910, he was teaming for Frank Clark hauling freight from Laws Station to Bishop. One day he, Frank Clark and Ally McNally were teaming together. When the day's work was completed, Forrest unhitched his team, put his horse in the barn and went to get them some hay. He was found between the haystack and the barn, paralyzed. The victim of a stroke. Although he was only in his early thirties, gentle little Jennie waited for him to recover, but in a few years she herself died, and Forrest remained an invalid until his death in 1921.

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Don and Maggie continued to live in Bishop on the Thompson ranch until they sold the property to the City of Los Angeles, then they moved to Oakdale. Three of their four children were already in high school before they left Bishop.

Carrie married twice and had three children. Her elder son Allen McDonald was lost in the First World War. She met Larry DeLuchi, a very fine man who was the plumbing contractor for the high school which was being built at that time and they were married. She has lived in Oakdale with him ever since.

Hattie had two children, Charles and Forrest Bell. Her second husband was A.O. Adams, a building contractor who constructed the building where the Chalfant Press and other businesses are located, the theatre and the stores north of it to the Westerner, several of the power plants, some of Bishop's sidewalks and other Inyo buildings.

Harold was married but had no children. He passed away a few years ago. Vangie Wonacott Backert Robinson has two children. She lives in Oakland. Dwight is married and has no children. He is living in Fresno (unable to read last part). The only child of Charles and Rachael Wonacott who remains in Bishop is Charles Albert (Bob). He is engaged in the dairy business. His daughter Thelma is married to Tom Summers Jr. and lives on a ranch near Minden, Nevada. They have three sons. His daughter Barbara is married to Horace Evans. They have one daughter and live at the family home in Bishop. His son Thomas married Kathleen Murphy, a teacher at Bishop High School. They live in Bishop and have no children.

Rachael Wonacott passed away in 1922 and Charles Wonacott in 1929, after earning the respect of all who knew them. Both are buried in the Pioneer Cemetery in Bishop.

The material in this report is based on articles in the *Inyo Register* and on the personal reminiscences of members of the Wonacott family. Due to the time, which has elapsed since the events herein described, there may be some insecurities in recalling and interpreting the information, but to the best of our knowledge this is the Wonacott Story. (Papers of Forrest Backert)

(Compilers Note: the above statement appeared at the end of this document, however there is neither date nor any names of those who wrote this story. It is merely part of papers of Forrest Backert, son of Evangeline (Vangie) Wonacott, grandson of Charles and Rachael (Huckaby) Wonacott. I have since been told by Forrest Backert that this history was written by Kathleen Murphy Wonacott, wife of Tom Wonacott. It was written for a project for the Historical Society in Bishop, of which Kathleen was a member at that time.)

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BIOGRAPHICAL OUTLINE OF CHARLES WILLIAM WONACOTT

Born Nov.8, 1849. Probably in Newbern, Virginia. Died Nov.14, 1929. in San Luis Obispo, Calif. Buried in family plot, Pioneer Cemetery, Bishop, California.

Charles Wonacott's family lived in Virginia since prior to 1750. As a young child he and his family moved to Illinois, where they lived around the Sangamon River, in Virginia City, Jacksonville, Zion City, Chandlerville and Decatur. It appears the family spent the time of the Civil War in Illinois and after the war moved for a short time to Kansas and then on to Missouri, the best indication is that they left Illinois about 1869 when Charles was about 20. His older brother, George Washington Wonacott took a soldier's claim to a farm near what is now Pittsburg, Kansas, but left it to move to Osceola, Missouri, and it was there that Charles married Rachael Letitia Huckaby on June 16, 1872, at Ritche's Mill. They lived in Osage, Missouri where their first child, Franklin was born. The family of the Huckaby's, the Smiths and Charles formed a party and left Ft. Scott, Kansas May 2, 1874 on the long trip across the prairie to California. This portion is best told in the history titled "The Wonacott Family", by Kathleen Wonacott.

The father of Charles William Wonacott was Kennerly Buckingham Wonacott. The mother of Charles William was Margaret Bell, she married Kennerly Feb.27, 1844, in Virginia, the same day as her brother Crockett Bell married Kennerly's sister Elizabeth Little is known of her excepting that she was the first of the four wives of Kennerly Wonacott and the mother of the first eight of his fourteen children. She gave birth to John, George, Mary, Charles, Sarah, Peyton, Nancy and Margaret. She was born in either Virginia or Tennessee about 1825, Married Kennerly Feb.27, 1844 and their first child was born in 1844. In his history Charles Newton Wonacott tells of two brothers that married two sisters (actually a brother and a sister married a brother and a sister). This created the situation where the children were double cousins and he says they would be closer related than brother and sister. That is true, the children of Margaret Bell and Kennerly Wonacott were always close to the Bells, especially John Newton Bell, throughout all of their lives.

On May 19, 1900 a farmer and rancher named Jim Butler found samples of rich ore in the desert where Tonopah is now located, he took the samples back with him to his ranch, got his hay in for the winter at the ranch, and on August 25, 1900 located the first mining claim at what was to be the town of Tonopah, one of the great mining booms of Nevada history.

In the spring of 1901 the rush began, mines were opening and a town began to form. A row of shacks and tent houses were erected along what is now the main street, the Mizpah Hotel was a tent, sanitary facilities were constructed, with a shovel, if at all, and the law was the same six shooter that was used to settle the west. By August 1901 the population of Tonopah was approaching 900, there was a newspaper, several saloons, dance halls and the town was booming.

By August 1901 Charley Wonacott and his partner George Hall were in the contracting business in Tonopah. By January 1902 they were in the undertaking business and from that day until November of 1912 all death certificates for Nye County (Tonopah) were signed either by Charles Wonacott or George Hall. After 1912, Charley became partners with Frank J. Cavanaugh until 1920 at which time he released his half interest in the business, including the funeral parlor, hearse and piano to Mary

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Cavanaugh, Frank's daughter, for the grand sum of \$10.00. For all deaths that occurred in Tonopah the certificates were either signed by Chas. Wonacott, George Hall or Frank Cavanaugh until 1935, which is probably the time that Frank died. Charles was County Coroner of Nye County and signed death certificates for other undertakers in that capacity. For instance, it is known that during all of 1901 there was an undertaking firm of Sawle and Hollis operating in Tonopah, but there are no death certificates signed with their name.

The Wonacott family history states that Charles had a taxi service in Tonopah, it is known that he freighted Lumber into town, had a contracting business, was a busy undertaker and then in February of 1903 he purchased the Eclipse Restaurant & Dance Hall on Summit Street for the Sum of \$519.14. In September of 1903 he purchased the Union Dance Hall on Corona Ave. He made a total of nineteen property transactions in Tonopah that are on the records. There must have been more because he bought property that there is no record of him ever selling. It is known that he had a sawmill on the Owens River and a ranch in Bishop. It would be fair to say that he was an active man, not one to waste his time.

No story of Charles Wonacott and his family would be complete without some of the history of Bishop. His children were raised there and each of them always felt that Bishop was home and it had a special place in their hearts as long as they lived.

Settlement didn't begin in the Owens Valley until the 1860's, so it was a new community just being settled when the Huckaby's and Wonacott's arrived there. There were some parties through the southern part, the Manly Party in 1849 through Death Valley, Captain Joe Walker in 1833 was the first white man known for sure to come through the Owens Valley. Before him Jedediah Smith had traversed eastern California and perhaps came through the valley. Fremont named the Valley after one of his men, who never saw it, this on his trip of 1845. Jedediah Smith is said to have discovered gold in Mono in 1825, more than 20 years before Marshall picked up those nuggets at Coloma that started the gold rush. Cord Norst, a miner rediscovered gold in Mono Gulch in 1859 and that was the beginning of settlement in the Mono-Inyo area. Prior to 1861 prospecting had been the main purpose of the immigrants, but in 1861 the McGee's and Summers drove cattle into the Valley, and Henry Vansickle and A. Van Fleet (http://www.owensvalleyhistory.com/bishop_residents/page48.html) came to the Valley and settled. Van Fleet built, at what is now Laws, the first white man's habitation, he cut some wild hay, the first harvest of any kind. Samuel Bishop came in 1861 and gave his name to Bishop Creek, and hence the town. It wasn't long until battles with the Indians began and they continued off and on through 1866 when hostilities in the Valley pretty well ended. The first structure in Bishop proper was a blacksmith shop near where West Line and Main Streets are today; it was put up in 1864. In 1866 the County of Inyo was formed. By 1875 mail and stages left the county six times a week for Aurora. The seventies are spoken of as the "Lawless Years", and that they were. Two sheriffs were killed while performing their duties during this time, and brawling, knifing, and the Colt spoke louder than the law of the county. It was during this time that the Huckaby's and the Wonacott's came to the Valley to make a new home. This was a land for pioneers, a new land, a land of opportunities, but not a place for the weak or faint of heart, but they were neither.

Going to Bishop in the hot summer days, before air conditioning in cars, required a long hot trip through the dessert, but when approaching Bishop, the first indication that relief was nearing would be the smell of new mown hay. That sweet smell hung over the town, not like the smog over cities today, it was pleasant, refreshing and foretold of things yet to come, of cool irrigation ditches for swimming, of

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green pastures and green trees that were a relief to the eye after a day spent in the dessert, of seeing aunts, uncles and cousins, of feeling the excitement the grownups felt at coming home. There were farms with horses, cows, haystacks that had mice in them to kill, there was milking to be done. There was an uncle that would let a little guy hold the reins and drive the team for a way. That would make any boy proud, proud that they could do such a thing, and proud that his uncle trusted him to do it. Of course, in latter years, it would dawn on you that the horses knew where they were going and didn't really need any help from you. But it was too late to destroy the image, it had been planted, it had done its job.

All the aunts and uncles are gone, the ranch on Dixon Lane is sagebrush excepting for the old silo that stands, a mute monument to a place, a place that will never be a home to anyone again.

What happened to Bishop and why the ranches that were once green and fruitful are now nothing but dessert is the story of man's quest for that most precious of things, water (http://www.owensvalleyhistory.com/ov_aqueduct1/page18.html). He must have it, and he will have it, and Los Angeles through their Metropolitan Water District did take it. How they took it is a bitter part of California history. There was dynamiting of the aqueduct, dead horses were put into it, and the Alabama gates were opened and the water let spill into the dessert by a group of armed men that defied the authorities. Taking the water took the lifeblood of the Valley. But Los Angeles did buy some of the land, and then let the ranches go back to dessert. They didn't pay fair prices just took the water, then when there was no water they paid the ranchers distressed prices. They did pay for some of the businesses in town. For instance they paid A. O. Adams, the husband of Hattie Wonacott, for his business, home, equipment and furnishings the sum of \$34,515.50. Was it a fair price? Probably, if you wanted to sell your means of livelihood, leave the place where you were born, see your family scattered and settle in a new place. (A. O. Adams and Hattie went to Pismo and built the New Adams Motel).

The fact that there was so much bitterness, that the Legislature of the State Of California did vote to censure the City Of Los Angeles (the only such vote in its history). It was so well publicized in the state that Will Rodgers found cause to say that Los Angeles felt they needed more water to put into their orange juice. It was, and remains, a dark time in the history of the "City Of The Angles."