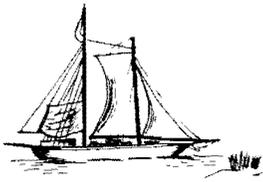


# SAN JOAQUIN HISTORIAN



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## TALES OF OLD SAN JOAQUIN CITY

By EARLE E. WILLIAMS

[Continued from the January-March 1974 Issue]

### THE "GHOST" OF JACK LONDON'S SEA-WOLF

Captain Benjamin Walters was the senior partner of the Island Transportation Company on Banner Island in Stockton. The other partner was Captain Jack Curry, former owner of one of the smaller companies that had merged to form the new company. And as mentioned earlier, Captain Isbell was the senior of many licensed ship captains and pilots in the employ of the company.

In the early days, before he had come to Stockton, Captain Walters had been the owner-captain of a whaling vessel making trips out of San Francisco Bay to Japan, Alaska, and the Aleutian Islands. Between trips, and while his ship was being refitted, he spent a good deal of time in the saloons down along the Oakland waterfront, spinning yarns of his colorful adventures in foreign lands and on the high seas.

Among his attentive listeners there was a young man named Jack London, who occasionally queried him on some point or other, and took notes in a little notebook. When London's *The Sea-Wolf* was published, Captain Walters became famous in the Bay Area. It was known on every waterfront that he was Wolf Larsen, "a man of primitive brutalities, yet a possessor of a keen mind and an indomitable will" who commanded the "Ghost." He was Wolf Larsen, the principal character in the book, and Jack London was the cabin boy picked up in a drowning condition from the waters of San Francisco Bay and shanghaied aboard the sailing vessel.

This was the beginning of a lifelong friendship between Captain Walters and Jack London, the story of which if told would rival any of those that made London famous.

Some time later Walters gave up his whaling expeditions on the high seas and he put his vessel on the river run between San Francisco and Sacramento, with occasional trips up the San Joaquin River to Stockton. Now he had a name to live up to, it seems, as everyone who knew him expected him to be Wolf Larsen. He had always been a tough captain and now he became tougher than ever. There was not a man on his ship, the cabin-boy excepted, who had not suffered a beating at his hands for some infraction of the rules, imagined or otherwise. This, of course, was in keeping to a great extent with the code of the sea at that time. But the end result was that the crew hated the captain and they wanted above all else to see him get some of his own medicine.

The ship's crew made their plans carefully and one night, while the vessel was tied up at the San Francisco docks, they went ashore and hired a professional prizefighter to give the captain a good licking; each man chipped in to pay his share of the fee demanded by the fighter. They then proceeded to dress him in seaman's clothes and to instruct him in the procedure to be employed in getting hired by the captain. One member of the regular crew would not show up for sailing the next morning so that the captain would certainly need a new hand.

So far their scheme worked well. Came morning and the captain hired the bogus seaman, no doubt thinking that here was a robust young man -- one that he could whip into shape on the trip up the river to Sacramento.

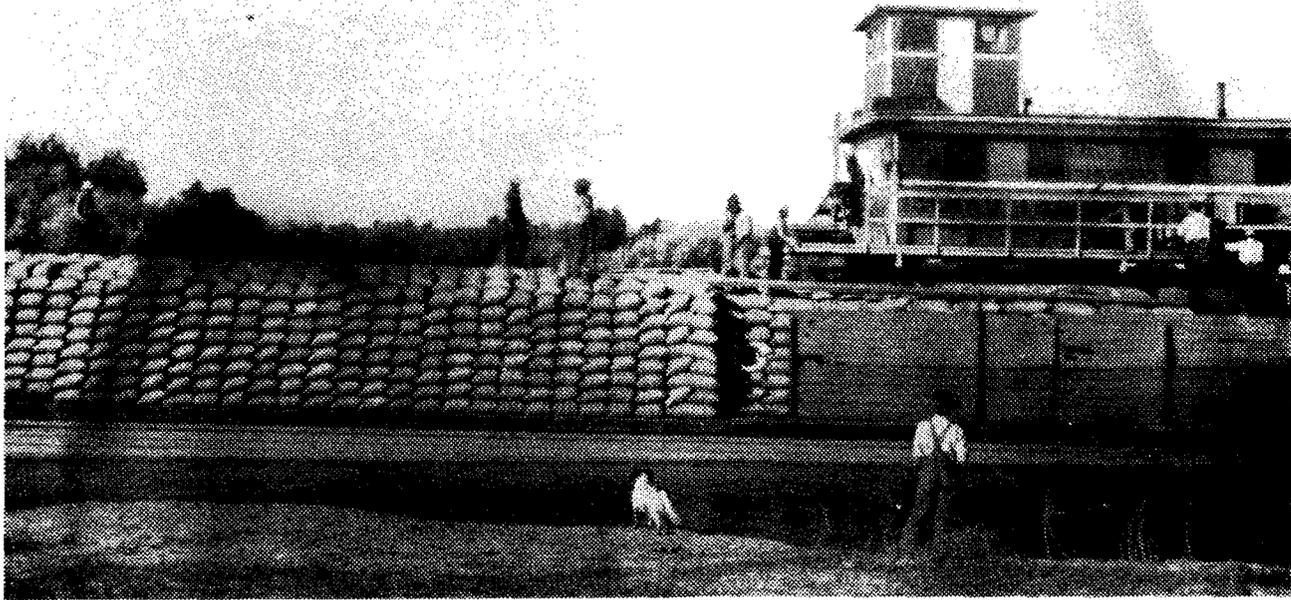
The crew was secretly jubilant. They knew that on the trip up the river the vessel would stop at Isleton, Walnut Grove, New Hope, and other landings to deliver cargo and pick up freight, and anything could happen. The captain would then go ashore, as was his habit, as soon as the gang plank was set, taking what men he needed to handle the cargo. It was their plan to have the prizefighter do his dirty work on shore so the captain could not claim mutiny on board ship.

The best-laid plans sometimes go awry, and such was to be the case here. In their jubilant anticipation the crew just naturally talked too much and too loud and the cabin boy learned of their plan. He secretly informed Captain Walters, giving him an idea of where the fight was to take place.

The riverbank at the New Hope landing was much higher than the deck of the boat and when the crew got the cleated gangplank set the captain was the first man ashore. He stood near the gangplank and watched as the men began coming ashore. As the prizefighter started up the gangplank toward him, the captain suddenly made a dash down the gangplank that would do credit to a modern football player bucking the center of the line. He literally rammed the prizefighter with a tremendous force, knocking the wind out of him. The force of the collision sent him through the guardropes into the river, falling between the ship and the river bank. When he was fished out he was nearly dead, and in no condition to take on the captain as planned.

Walters' Island Transportation Company (mentioned earlier in the narrative) was to play a vital role in the development of the Delta islands, the West Side Plains, and

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A BOY AND HIS DOG watch as the Island Transportation Company's **Barge No. 6**, loaded with sacks of grain, is readied for the trip down the San Joaquin River to Stockton.

This was a typical scene along the river front from San Joaquin City to the Durham Ferry bridge crossing during the grain harvesting season. Courtesy of the author.

of the river towns (including San Joaquin City) in their later years. Through the years Captain Jim Isbell told the writer many stories (like the one above) of his association with Captain Walters; of the mosquito boats on the San Joaquin; of the potato boats that hauled George Shima's island potatoes; of one particular boat (the **Potato Queen**) that served as a floating general store catering to the needs of the islands' Chinese and Japanese residents; of the Filipinos and Hindus who also labored on the Delta farms. The **Islander** that Captain Isbell skippered was such a boat at times, according to the season. He told of one trip he made up the river to San Joaquin City with his **Islander**, to pick up a load of oak wood for the woodyard on Banner Island. The woodyard was located a few hundred feet from Captain Walters' office. While the barge was being unloaded the owner of the woodyard, who had ordered the wood, came out and watched the operation, remarking to Isbell's mate that the wood was so crooked it would not pile straight, and that he feared on this account he was not getting good measure. The mate did not sympathize with him much, and remarked sourly: "If you think this wood is crooked you ought to see the wood we left on the landing at San Joaquin City, which we intend to bring down to you next trip."

Disturbed at the rather impertinent remark, the customer went straight to Captain Walters and told him what the mate had said. The captain called in the mate and asked him if he had made such a remark, to which he replied in a surly manner, "Well, it's the truth, ain't it?"

Walters, infuriated, hit the mate a tremendous blow, knocking him senseless through a doorway into an adjoining room. Such was the character of this most colorful man who played an important part in the development of the Delta and the West Side during the relatively brief but interesting era of water transportation in San Joaquin County.

### GEORGE WILLIAMS AND HIS SMOKELESS GUNPOWDER

On Wednesday night, September 8, 1897, a Central Pacific Railroad passenger train was stopped by two masked men between Ripon and Lathrop in an attempt to rob the express car. Although they failed to blow the express car door, before they fled the scene one of them shot and seriously wounded a "hobo" who had the misfortune to have been "riding the rails" on that particular train that night. This was big news in San Joaquin County as all the large-city newspapers in California ran large headlines and front-page stories on what happened that night on the Central Pacific line. What jolted them even more -- particularly the people of San Joaquin City -- was that just a few days later the two alleged robbers were captured and one of them turned out to be George Williams, a native son of this little river town.

Only the events of that night made the newspapers; the remainder of the story, as is usual in many cases like this one, was never printed. And it was this unpublished story -- a story of a young man whose friends and neighbors ignored his requests for help -- that the citizens of San Joaquin City knew to be the truth; that what had happened was not so much the failure of George Williams as it was the failure of a community to respond when a member of it needed their support.

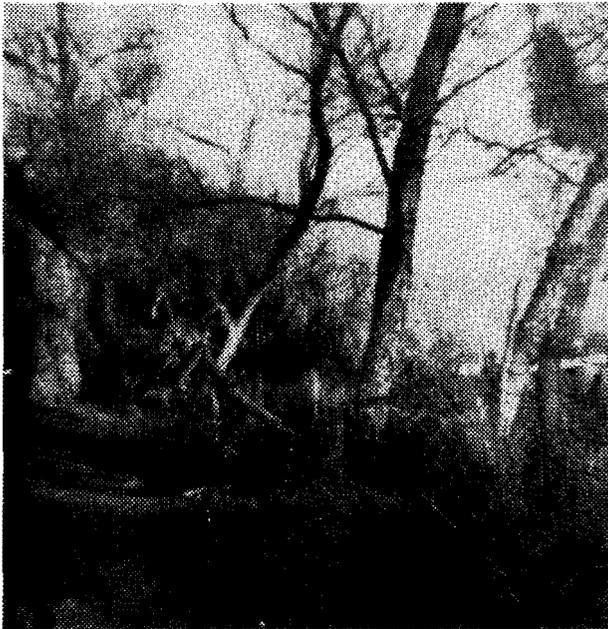
In the first place George was in many ways different from the other boys with whom he grew up in San Joaquin City. When he was scarcely older than a child he would embark in his rowboat and row up the river a quarter mile or so. There, on the east bank of the river, where a slough had broken through into the west channel from Sturgeon Bend when it had overflowed in one of the many floods that were common to the area, he would beach his boat, ship his oars, and land.

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Here there was a beautiful grove of giant, ancient oak trees. Here in solitude, amid sylvan surroundings, he would hunt and fish. He was fascinated with the spot and he would spend countless hours there, watching the squirrels and chipmunks, the birds and other wildlife in the dense brush, as lonely little boys are wont to do.

As the boy grew older he acquired another and greater love -- the love of learning. He became an avid reader, spending hours there in the oak grove between the west channel of the river and Sturgeon Bend reading books which he borrowed from the New Jerusalem School and other sources. As he grew older he became interested in more technical subjects -- books on chemistry, steam power, geometry, physics and electricity.

In time he acquired a tent, and he set up a camp along the little slough. Here he often lived for days at a time, alone, when school was not in session. There were berries in profusion along the slough. There was wildlife to be had, and plenty of fish in Sturgeon Bend. Not liking willow branches for fishing poles, he planted a stand of bamboo at his



**VIEW FROM THE RIVER** of George Williams' old camp site. Remnants of fences and pens for his gardens and penned animals can still be seen. His first tent camp was located on this spot. Many of the large old oaks have been cut down in the last twenty-five years. Some of the original bamboo cane thicket planted by Williams can be seen in the center background of the photograph. *Courtesy of the author.*

campground. The bamboo is still there today.

Because he could not afford to buy ammunition for his rifle and his shotgun he reloaded his own shell casings. In those days practically everyone did this. One could buy a kit including bullet molds, lead and shot, black powder, and swages to shrink and re-size brass shotgun shell cases, which would expand every time they were shot.

He did not like the black powder because of the smoke it created when it went off, and he determined to do something about it. This dissatisfaction with the black powder was to change his life entirely.

Through his innate cleverness and from the learning he received by his thorough reading of technical books which he had borrowed, he conceived of a process for making

smokeless gunpowder. This involved the use of nitric acid, sulphuric acid, and cotton.

Now he dreamed in his little tent on Sturgeon Bend of the impact on the whole world his invention of smokeless gunpowder would make: of the prestige and the fame in store for him as a young inventor. To George Williams his invention was an accomplished fact. All he needed now was a little money for equipment and supplies to prove his idea beyond any possible doubt. Then too he would need a little money to go to Washington, D.C., to make arrangements with the Patent Office and with Army Ordnance.

George Williams started out hopefully enough and he tried every way he knew to beg or borrow money from the people of San Joaquin City, but without success. To be sure, the early years of the 1890's were a poor time to borrow money anywhere. The panic and depression of 1893 had left the farmers of the south and west in particular prostrated; the frugal German farmers of the area were not about to loan or give any of what little money they might still have, and the Irish sheepmen and ranchers never had any to spare at any time. Who knew; things might get worse before they got better! He met with refusal from everyone, and from some mild amusement or even contempt. Who would believe that a young recluse, practically a hermit in fact, could have conceived of such a valuable invention?

He had heard that great things were happening out at Corral Hollow, just fifteen miles to the southwest. This was in 1893 and a railroad, the Alameda and San Joaquin, was scheduled to be built into Stockton from the Tesla coal mines. Soon the ranchers out on the plains would be hearing the whistles of the trains hauling coal to Stockton, to the coal bunkers on the channel. There were also rumors that brick and pottery plants were to be developed at Corral Hollow as part of the Treadwell "empire."

Further, he had heard that the Treadwell brothers, progressive owners of the mines, were interested in anything scientific. Had they not even named their coal mine for Mikola Tesla, the great inventor and scientist? And their brick plant would be named for Andrew Carnegie, the great financier!

George finally got an appointment with James, one of the Treadwell brothers, who listened to his story and his proposition and then called in his powderman and foremen for consultation. The end result of his plea for help was a firm rejection on the part of the Treadwells because in coal mining they could see no advantage in smokeless powder. What difference if it did smoke a little? The miners could wait until the smoke cleared out of the tunnel after the blast.

This seemed to be the last straw for Williams. If the Treadwells, known for their progressive ideas, would not back him, who else would? In a frenzy of urgency and despair he decided on a bold scheme to get the money he needed. After the army had gratefully accepted the new smokeless gunpowder, which it needed, any little infraction against society and the criminal and moral codes on his part would surely be forgiven and forgotten in the hero worship that would surely follow.

So one evening after dark he shouldered his shotgun, fully loaded with the old black-powder shells, and he made his way north along River Road to Bantas on the Central Pacific Railroad line. Covering his nose and mouth with a bandana, he held up the railroad depot office in true Western fashion, directing Mrs. Marble, the station agent, to open the safe under threat of the shotgun. Protesting that there was no money in the safe and little in the depot, she opened the safe and proved it to him. Grabbing a little change Mrs. Marble kept in a desk drawer, he quickly withdrew into the darkness outside and made good his escape down along the river

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bottoms to his camp at Sturgeon Bend.

Because she knew of George Williams' quest for money she had a pretty good idea who the young bandit might be and she promptly telegraphed the sheriff, Thomas Cunningham. The next morning the sheriff went directly to Williams' campsite and he arrested the youth.

At the ensuing trial George Williams was convicted of robbery but because of his age he was sentenced to a four-year term at Preston Reformatory in Ione. At Preston he was a model prisoner, and having been of a studious nature he made use of the prison library. He was released early for good behavior, more mature and a lot smarter. Whether he was any wiser, though, was a matter that was soon to be questioned.

While at Ione young Williams met an inmate of German descent, George Schlegel, and they became close friends. Upon their release they both came back to San Joaquin City, Schlegel joining Williams out at the latter's old campsite. It was now the year 1897 and already American newspapers were inflaming American public opinion against Spain for the alleged atrocities being committed against the helpless Cubans. George once more became obsessed with his idea of smokeless gunpowder. What a boon it would be to the American soldier, in case of war, to be able to shoot at the enemy without having to conceal the position from which he is firing. This time he wrote a letter to Army Ordnance in Washington, D. C., explaining his invention to them, and he anxiously awaited a reply.

Williams was still a studious, shy young man. On the other hand, Williams' friends were apprehensive of George Schlegel and his intentions. They did not approve of his close friendship with George. As things soon turned out, they appear to have been quite justified in their analysis of the situation. For George Williams was about to try again to get money, and it seems most probable that it was Schlegel who talked him into making a second attempt.

In those days the Central Pacific ran a fast passenger train from Los Angeles to San Francisco, over the Visalia-Lathrop branch on the east side of the Valley. It left Los Angeles in the morning and had an express car for the transfer of securities and large sums of cash and specie to the banks in San Francisco. This was the San Joaquin Valley Express.

The train was scheduled to pass over the Visalia branch between Ripon and Lathrop between nine and ten o'clock in the night. It was a perfect set-up for a train robbery, and the two men made their plans.

They were both on parole and so not allowed to have guns, but they prevailed upon John Ohm to lend them his guns and two saddle horses, saying that they wanted to go hunting to replenish their larder. It was easy to get the guns because John Ohm trusted Williams completely, and he had loaned his guns and horses to him on other occasions.

About eight o'clock on Wednesday night, September 8, 1897, the two young men left their campsite and rode swiftly through the dark over the Durham Ferry Road to Morana Switch (north of Ripon) on the Central Pacific line, a distance of about ten miles. In addition to Ohm's guns they carried a gallon of kerosene and a bundle of dynamite, already capped and primed, and supplied with a short fuse. Its purpose was blow off the door of the express car.

On that fateful night George Williams carried in his pocket a letter just received from the War Department, expressing keen interest in his invention of smokeless gunpowder.

Arriving at Morana Switch, the two men tied up their horses in a clump of willows and made their preparations. They went down the track (southward) and set home-made torpedoes according to the railroad code for stopping the train. Then they piled railroad ties on the track and drenched

them with kerosene. With everything set, they waited, ears close to the rails to catch the telegraphed sound of the whirling wheels of the approaching passenger train.

It was their first train robbery and one can understand the nervous tension that built up while they waited. Finally they heard it; they lighted the ties on the track and prepared for action. As expected, the engineer in the approaching train set the emergency brake valve and reversed the "Johnson Bar," bringing the train to a grinding halt. The two men quickly made their way to the express car: Schlegel to set the charge and light the fuse, Williams to guard him to prevent any interference. All of a sudden the unexpected occurred when a hobo suddenly appeared on the scene, an innocent, non-paying passenger that night. Williams claimed later that the man acted as if he were about to interfere with the robbery, but it is likely that he was only confused -- glad to be alive after that sudden stop, and wondering what had happened. Anyway, he was shot and wounded, probably by Williams, who panicked and immediately fled for his horse. Schlegel, left alone, was forced to flee also, without ever lighting the fuse on the dynamite charge.

Even though the attempted robbery had failed the two men felt that they were safe from detection as they fled down the Stanislaus River Road (now the West Ripon Road) to their camp back at Sturgeon Bend. They had both worn bandanas, and both were riding borrowed horses. None-the-less, upon arrival at the camp they hurriedly picked up supplies and blankets and headed for the hills for a few days until the excitement would die down.

When Sheriff Cunningham arrived at the scene the train had already gone on its way. In searching the immediate area for clues the Sheriff found a letter from the War Department that had been addressed to George Williams in San Joaquin City -- the reply he had been waiting for. The letter had been opened and the Sheriff quite rightly surmised that it had dropped out of the pocket of one of the robbers.

Organizing a posse, Cunningham made his way to Williams' camp. Finding the camp and tent in disarray as if it had been deserted in haste, he set up a guard there in case either man should return. The remainder of the posse then began combing the river bottom lands, from Mossdale as far south as Hill's Ferry, and over to the Pacheco Pass.

On the third day Williams was spotted approaching his camp, and upon being challenged by the two men on guard he made a move as though to flee. The guards fired, hitting the horse and knocking him down. Williams managed to escape on foot, however, and during the next few days and nights he played "hide and seek" with the posse in the brush along the river. Several times members of the posse passed within touching distance of him.

He finally decided to surrender, partly due to hunger and partly due to the fact that the sheriff had brought in bloodhounds to ferret him out. Once he had surrendered he cooperated with the sheriff in every way, telling the whole story, including his motive -- which the letter made clear. He told who his partner was and where he had gone into hiding. Schlegel was soon captured up in the hills near Mount Boardman.

The two men were tried immediately on a felony charge of attempted robbery of a train -- a federal offense. The Honorable Edward I. Jones was the presiding judge; McNoble and McNoble served as the defense attorneys.

Both men were convicted on October 30, 1897, and were sentenced to San Quentin for life terms on the recommendation of the jury. They began their sentences on December 4, 1897.

A sensational feature of the trial came when George Schlegel made a solemn vow in open court that he would even

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the score with George Williams if he ever got the chance for having turned state's evidence against him.

William H. Riecks, a native of the San Joaquin City area, was appointed sheriff of San Joaquin County in 1911 and he immediately began to use his influence to get George Williams released from prison. Petitions were signed by area residents. There was rejoicing in San Joaquin City when he came back once again to his camp near Sturgeon Bend. The people saw to it that a large olive-drab officer's tent was waiting for him, all set up with supplies, equipment, books, and just about everything he could wish for -- except black powder and firearms.

The years in San Quentin had not been wasted. Now he was an expert electrician, a trade that was to prove very useful. The officer's tent had been erected so that its open front faced the river and soon he had contrived a waterwheel and generator on a river float. From that time on his tent was brilliantly lighted at night. Many of the old homes in San Joaquin City and neighboring ranches were wired by George. These include the two-story John Ohm home and the Henry

dropped their nickel in a can as they entered.

For years Williams, as a paroled convict, had to report periodically to the sheriff's office. Transportation being as difficult as it was in those days, this was a real burden to him. A happy solution to this problem was found when some of the sheriff's deputies visited him there at his camp. He saw to it that they were supplied with slip-point salmon spears and that they were given a chance to enjoy the thrill of salmon-spearing at his river fence. He saw to it that they tried their hand at netting shad and that they cut some of his bamboo poles and fished for catfish in the deep, still waters of Sturgeon Bend. And he saw to it that they went hunting for geese and ducks, and for deer in season too.

Soon the entire area around George Williams' camp was the best-policed place in the whole county, especially on week-ends. City police and the constables came too, and if one happened to think of it, he would get Williams' signature on the probation report to take back with him to the sheriff's office.

And we boys of San Joaquin City and outlying ranches, we



**THE JOHN OHM HOME** at San Joaquin City. This photo, showing John and Annie Ohm and two of their daughters, was taken shortly after the house was built in 1907. Note the small palm tree in the front yard. George Williams did the wiring for electric lighting, making it one of the first homes on the West Side to be able to enjoy the benefits of electricity. This photo was taken by Charlie Dreyer.

Courtesy of the author.

C. Fisk home and barns. This was before the days of utility power lines in rural areas. Wind-driven generators and great banks of wet-cell batteries in glass jars were used as a power source. On the dry plains of the San Joaquin in those days there was always plenty of wind to drive the generators.

Williams built wire pens for his poultry and corrals for his livestock and kennels for his watchdogs. Between the tent and the slough he planted a garden, mostly vegetables but some flowers too. He contrived a wireless receiver, as it was called then, a crystal set with earphones that is even now in the possession of Al Ekenberg out at the New Jerusalem School. This was back in the year 1911 and we would often listen with George to the "spark-gap" stations on the warships in San Francisco Bay. He knew Morse Code and would interpret for us.

About 1913 George set up and operated the first "nickelodeon" motion picture theater in Tracy. It was in a large room on the lower floor of the I.O.O.F. Hall on Sixth Street. The flickering picture was thrown on the wall at one end of the hall, and the customers sat in chairs after they had

too were special friends of George Williams. When we visited him we would cut a new fishing pole from his bamboo, and we went fishing with him. We usually tried to visit him during the week days -- when the place was not overrun with police!!

Along about 1914 a law was passed (and enforced) prohibiting the use of salmon fences along the river. We complied with the law and did not build any fences across the shallow sand bars. We just went down to some river bar in a big group of boys, early in the morning before the sun was up enough of us to make a human fence across the river. The lawmakers had not thought to prohibit the salmon spear or this kind of a fence. There would be the Henkes, the Petermans, the Gordons, the Schnabels, the Gerlacks, the Kosters, the Murphys, and of course the writer. The salmon that could get through our human fence was a rare one and, of course, it was more fun without the wire.

As Williams' campsite developed into something of a private fishing resort he constructed three rather small wooden buildings, one of which he used as his home. Two of these burned down shortly after his death in the early 1950's.

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but a small building was still standing under the old oak trees in the 1960's. This building, a few fenceposts, and some chickenwire fencing that once enclosed his yards and gardens are all that survived him. And like the old cemetery at San Joaquin City, the building was virtually destroyed by vandals after his death.

Although George Williams was just as friendly, interesting, and lovable after his release from San Quentin as he had been in his younger days, his years of confinement had left their mark permanently on him. For one thing, he would never allow a person to walk behind him, regardless of whom it was. Whenever he was in a public building, such as a barber shop or restaurant, he was always to the rear of the building, facing the door. He was always watchful and on guard. He had another peculiarity. He distrusted anyone who neglected to shake hands with him. This meant every time the person met him, even after a short absence. Of course there is no doubt but what he never forgot the threat made upon him in court by George Schlegel, to kill him if he ever got the chance. He had to live under the shadow of this threat, but as it turned out Schlegel never did have the opportunity to carry out his threat; years later he died in solitary confinement in San Quentin Prison. So it was reported in the newspapers of the day. What a relief this news must have been to a man who had walked alone for so long, afraid even to allow his shadow to walk along behind him.

[To be concluded in the Next Issue]



**ALL THAT REMAINS** of three buildings constructed by George Williams at his Sturgeon Bend campsite is this one frame shell. Fire destroyed the other two and vandals have practically destroyed this remaining structure.

Courtesy of the author.

**EDITOR'S NOTES:**

1. Captain Walters had purchased Banner Island and the Island Transportation Company used the site for stockpiling cargo in transit, for general company offices and repair yards, and for the stockpiling of oak wood used for fueling their steam-powered vessels. Originally it was an island and it lay west of the peninsula where Captain Weber had built his home in the 1850's. The slough separating it from the north bank of the Stockton Channel was filled sometime in the late 1850's, but the general area is still referred to as "Banner Island" by many of Stockton's old-timers. This large open area (running from Lindsay Street south to Stockton Channel and lying generally between Madison and Lincoln streets), before its subdivision for commercial purposes, was where the "Big Tent" of the traveling circuses would be spread when they came to town. Covert Martin's **Stockton Album Through the Years** (pp. 26 and 36) includes reproductions of two early Stockton maps which indicate clearly the change that occurred when the slough was filled. The earlier one shows the island and the slough; the later one (1860) shows the whole area simply as a part of the land mass north of Stockton Channel, with all the land south of Lindsay Street labeled as "Banner Island." Today the Guntert and Zimmerman firm leases the original Banner Island site from the City of Stockton.

Persons interested in doing research on local history, whether members of the Society or not, are invited to submit their manuscripts for publication in the **Historian**. The editor must, however, reserve the right to accept or reject and/or edit all material and photographs submitted.

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