

BACK IN TIME

My great-great Uncle Si McKee

BY EVELYN BYRNE WILLIAMS WITH JANEEN SATHRE

Everybody has relatives who highlight most of their genealogical history in some way, with pride or sometimes with prejudice. There is one in my family who could be both; he was Silas Simon (Si) McKee. Born in Sullivan County, Missouri, in 1844 to Joseph and Almira McKee, nearly the youngest of eight children, he would hardly know his oldest brother John M. McKee, born in 1827.

John M. (my great-grandfather) and other relatives came west by wagon train, arriving in the Rogue Valley in 1853. Sometime in the mid 1860s John returned to Missouri to bring his parents and siblings west to Oregon. Along the way they met a family with a couple of wagons going to eastern Oregon where they would need help floating down the Columbia

River by barge to their final destination, the Willamette Valley. John's wagon train would be taking the Applegate Trail, which came farther south and avoided the Columbia River crossing. Parting ways with his family, Si, near the age of 20, hired on to help the other family complete their journey, knowing there was a possibility he would never see his family again.

He must have done all right because a few years later he turned up in the Illinois Valley driving a stage from Crescent City, California, to Grants Pass, Oregon. Sometimes when Uncle Si was in Grants Pass after a stage run, he would come by to visit his McKee relatives. My mother remembered him quite well and said everyone was so glad to see him. They never knew when he would show up on his

horse named Nervy. He always seemed to be wearing a red kerchief around his neck and he always had time to enjoy a game of checkers, cribbage, or pedro with the kids. When he sometimes took a nap on the couch, the kids said he snored louder than anyone they had ever heard. They would shake him awake and he would tell them he was not asleep and had only closed his eyes to rest, making the kids laugh.

When the Gasquet Toll Road was completed in 1887, the Rockland Stage Stop (on the north side of the Smith River) and other stage stops went out of business, so Si lost his job. However, he was able to live in a cabin at the abandoned Rockland stop where he purchased some mining claims to mine for gold. That place soon became somewhat of a permanent

residence where he was able to exist quite well with salmon in the North Fork of the Smith River and some trout in other streams. Also the deer and bear, along with pigeons and grouse, gave him all the protein he needed. Some edible plants and berries along with beans (I am sure) filled out his menu nicely.

Si had fallen in love with the area and refused to move

closer to his many relatives in the Rogue Valley. He never married but the family believed there was a girl, named Kathleen, sometime in his past, because when he was visiting relatives one time, they played a phonograph record of "I'll take you home again, Kathleen," and he broke down crying. He would not tell them why.

Eventually he moved away from Rockland, probably because it had been sold, and he went to Sourdough where he continued his mining occupation at Diamond Creek and Bald Face Creek, all still in the Smith River drainage. This large area is mostly government land where cattlemen free-ranged their cattle. Heavy forest is not good forage but open space created by fire is. Thus Si's life was about to change.

For several years increasing fires in this area began to worry the government and an investigation was launched. It was decided that Si was hired by the cattlemen to start fires to make more grazing spaces, a common practice in those days. Si was arrested for arson and sent to jail. He never revealed his association with the cattlemen to the authorities. While in jail, his relatives laughed about him being able to have a better bed, meals, reading material and a good long rest.

He eventually returned to his mining operations and the forest recovered from the fires. The authorities and the relatives were relieved that Si had reformed. Unfortunately, Si does not ride pleasantly off into the sunset.

To be continued...

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Great-great Uncle Si, stage driver turned miner, among other things.



AUG. 1913 (Photo from Rockland, Oregon) Si's cabin on North Fork of Smith River - Old Rockland Stage Stop

Uncle Si lived in this cabin at the abandoned Rockland Stage Stop where he mined for gold.