

BACK IN TIME

The last of great-great Uncle Si

BY EVELYN BYRNE WILLIAMS WITH JANEEN SATHRE

When we left Si McKee in our last article (*Applegater* Winter 2013) he was returning to his mining endeavors in the Smith River country after having spent several years in the Oregon State Prison for arson.

In mid-October 1922, Si visited some relatives living on 25 acres of very productive bottomland near Bear Creek at Tolo, where Fort Lane was located during the Rogue River War. He now owned a small horse named Nellie and an Australian shepherd named Jiggs. However, when he came out of the mountains to visit, he would leave Nellie at Waldo and then ride the “jitney” on into Medford, where it is assumed he walked to Tolo. The relatives always enjoyed Si’s visits but were a little concerned about his habit of carrying gold

nuggets on his person.

Not only did he have the gold nuggets, but also he talked about his nuggets and gold dust that he kept in a tin can at his cabin. They advised him to deposit his cache in a safe place, but he didn’t “cotton” to banks, and besides, he kept his small pistol close at hand. Many of the old-timers never really trusted banks and often buried their gold somewhere in a hidden place near their dwellings. Si did, however, leave a handwritten note giving his mining claim to the family living there at Tolo.

One time when uncle Si came to visit, he had a young man with him that he had met in Waldo. The family was concerned when he said that the young man was going to go home with him to help do some

mining. And they were right to be worried about Si—in the third week of November they were notified by the authorities that he had been killed (shot?) in his cabin. Some friends had become suspicious when they had not seen him for quite some time and contacted

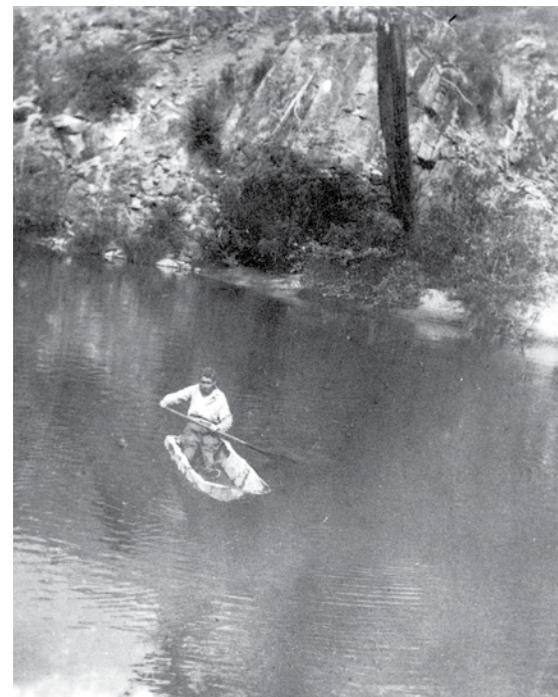
the local police. When police arrived at the cabin, they found his emaciated dog, Jiggs, guarding the cabin. In order to go in, they had to shoot him. They also shot the horse, which hadn’t had food for so long he was not savable.

They buried the remains of Uncle Si, 78, near his cabin

and advised the relatives to visit the claim site and take care of necessities. I was told that my grandfather, Amos McKee, and his son Ernest rode horseback from here on the Upper Applegate to Sourdough. The young man whom Si had taken with him from Waldo was never found, and the general opinion was that he killed Si for those nuggets and maybe the can of gold dust, which was never found either.

After Si’s death a kind man working on the road near the grave felt badly that no one had made a marker, so he found Si’s old metal bed frame and made a crude fence around the grave from its parts. Then as more time went by, another kind soul wanted to give Si a marker with his name on it. The metal marker says McGee instead of McKee but the relatives appreciated it regardless of the wrong name.

Years later my husband Clarence and I visited the mining claim and the remains of the cabin. The road was so bad that we needed four-wheel drive, and in some places I got out of the vehicle and walked rather than being bounced all over. As I



Rolland Hubbard in Si’s hand-hewn canoe on the Smith River in August 1913. The Hubbards were named in the will to inherit the mining claim.



A crossing on the Smith River near Uncle Si’s cabin.

stood looking at the grave site, my mind raced back to when great-great Uncle Si had contentedly lived there so many years and I was sad for his tragic death. I was also saddened by the fact that his marker was gone and only some of the bent and rusty supports of the old fence were there.

While still doing research on Uncle Si and his Sourdough claim, I went to the Del Norte Museum in Crescent City. I was looking for old photos of the early day stagecoaches and drivers. I didn’t find any of Uncle Si, but much to my delight, I saw the old grave “McGee” marker in one of the glass cases.

Evelyn Byrne Williams
with Janeen Sathre
541-899-1443