



# THE ELECTROLIER

Newsletter of the St. Helena Historical Society, Spring 2007, Vol.5 No.2

## *Sophie Marie Alstrom Mitchell*

*By Connie Kay*

Sophie Marie Alstrom Mitchell is one of St. Helena's interesting and talented early residents. She was born in Sweden on October 18, 1858 to Marie Dorothea Bremberg and Johan Nordstrom. Unfortunately, her father died before she was born.

Sven Alstrom was a family friend and it was arranged for Marie and Sophie to come to California. At the time, Sven was part-owner and manager of the Oriental Hotel in San Francisco. The very day that Marie arrived, June 28, 1860, she married Sven. Sven adopted Sophie. The family moved to St. Helena in 1862, and lived in Sulphur Springs Canyon. Sven had purchased the White Sulphur Springs Hotel, a popular spa.

St. Helena was quite remote until the railroad was built in 1868. However, Sophie was not lonely, as guests brought their children and her mother gave the family seven children who survived infancy. Sophie's education was local and she graduated from Napa Ladies Seminary in 1879. At the Seminary, she studied art and botany. One of her teachers was Virgil Williams, a founder of the California School of Design. Following graduation, Sophie became a teacher at the Seminary.

In 1880, the Alstroms moved to town, living at the Balmoral House on Madrona. Sven sold White Sulphur Springs and built the Windsor Hotel on Main Street in 1881. Sven died there in 1885.

Sophie made the acquaintance of the new minister of the Presbyterian Church, Reverend James Mitchell. James was born in Scotland and received his training there. He came

to America in 1873 and was assigned to the Calistoga Church. In 1875, he started the St. Helena Presbyterian Church and was its minister for 43 years. In 1883, Sophie and James, who was 17 years older than Sophie, were married. The couple lived on Crane Avenue with 13 acres of prunes and walnuts orchards. Later, they had a summer cottage at Dillon Beach.



The Mitchell family, Sophie and Rev. James Mitchell with their young sons John and James.

The Mitchells had 2 sons. John, born in 1884, went to the University of California at Berkeley and became the City of St. Helena's first Engineer. James was born in 1889, also attended the University of California at Berkeley and became an architect.

All those years of family life were busy, but Sophie continued her art, painting wildflowers. She used fine camel hair brushes and imported paper from England for her watercolor compositions. Her pictures date from 1877 to 1939. Sophie exhibited her work at the Midwinter Fair in San Francisco in 1894, and received much praise.

When she died, only 38 paintings were known to exist. However, Cornelia Williams, a relative of Virgil Williams, had purchased 64 paintings for \$5 each. These were found in the attic of Cornelia's house in New York after she passed away. Her granddaughter, Olive Williams, gave or sold them to the Haydn Foundation. The Napa

Valley Museum was able to purchase them and return them to us.

This talented woman who died at the age of 81, in 1940, is well remembered for her life here and for her beautiful pictures of our indigenous wildflowers.

(Connie Kay's sources for this article: *Wildflowers of Sophie Mitchell*, by Randolph Murphy, Napa Valley Museum. *Sophie Mitchell and her Flower Paintings*, by Jacqueline Boughton from Pacific Horticulture)

## PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Dear Members,

May brings us almost to the end point of our program year. We will take a summer break during July and August, with no programs scheduled. However, your board of directors won't take a break. Our annual strategic planning retreat will take place July 19 & 20. During this time we will analyze how the St. Helena Historical Society daily operations are going. We will also discuss the next steps in our journey towards opening the St. Helena History Center in 2010.

Our annual meeting took place on May 8, 2007 at the White Barn. We celebrated the 5 year anniversary of the founding of our society. Thanks to our hosts, the Garden family, we enjoyed a beautiful evening on the lawn with a delicious potluck dinner and speakers. Board of directors members were introduced and Betty Studebaker was welcomed as new board secretary. Gwen Becker was the founding board secretary since our inception in 2002. Upon leaving the board, she has taken over our "Voices of St. Helena" oral history project. We are very grateful to Gwen for all her hard work as board secretary.

Tricia Westbrook, board strategic planning chair, spoke of the progress we have made on the St. Helena History Center (see article).

Lastly, I encourage all of you to join us for the California Cavalry Civil War Reenactors dedication at the St. Helena Cemetery on June 23 at noon. They will place a military headstone at the grave of their original commander, Augustus Starr. This ceremony will include the 5<sup>th</sup> California Infantry Band and troopers, a riderless horse and full Civil War tack. It will be quite an event.

*Mariam Hansen, President*



Captain Donald G. Treco, Co. F, 2<sup>nd</sup> California Cavalry  
requests the honor of your presence at the  
MEMORIAL and MARKER DEDICATION  
For  
CAPTAIN AUGUSTUS W. STARR  
Saturday, June 23, 2007 at Noon\*  
St. Helena Public Cemetery  
2461 Spring Street, St. Helena, CA 94574

### *I'd like to join the St. Helena Historical Society!*

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_ Email \_\_\_\_\_

Individual \$30 Family \$50

Business/Organizatoin \$150 Life \$500

*I would like to:* Volunteer \_\_\_\_\_ Make a donation to the Society \_\_\_\_\_

St. Helena Historical Society  
P.O. Box 87  
St. Helena, CA 94574  
Voice mail: 707-967-5502  
Email: shhs@shpl.org  
Website: www.shstory.org

### Officers and Directors

Mariam Hansen, President  
Susanne Salvestrin, Vice President  
Betty Studebaker, Secretary  
Kim Farmer, Treasurer  
Frank Harrison  
Larry Hlavsa, Ex-Officio Director  
Skip Lane  
Roberta Oswald  
John Sales  
Tricia Westbrook

### Committee Notes:

The *Collections Committee* coordinates and manages the acquisition of new materials. It generally meets on the last Monday of the month at 9:30am in the library meeting room. Current chair of the committee is Susanne Salvestrin. You can email her at Susanne@salvestrinwinery.com

The *Events Committee* plans and presents events to teach the public about our local history. Plans have already begun for the annual Cemetery Tour, Nov. 3. Call Mariam Hansen, 963-5748 for more information.

Questions? Comments?

Call or email the Newsletter editor,  
Kim Farmer, at 963-0630,  
ksfarmer@seedgrain.com

### Are you receiving E-mail from us?

The society sends notices of activities and announcements to members by e-mail. Please enter [gcbnapa@sbcglobal.net](mailto:gcbnapa@sbcglobal.net) as an authorized sender if you have an automatic screening device in order to receive your member news.

## HISTORICAL SOCIETY ACTIVITIES

### “VOICES OF ST. HELENA”

“Voices of St. Helena”, our Oral History Program, has seven new volunteers ready to begin interviews. Pat Alexander, the new Educational Trunk coordinator for the Napa Valley Museum, who initiated our program, returned to deliver the training workshop on May 5<sup>th</sup>. We were fortunate to have Ashley Wright, John Thoreen, Carolyn Younger, Ken Taplin, Sandra Nichols, and Marissa Schleicher attend. All learned how to conduct an oral history interview and why oral history is so important.

By recording the memories of people who have lived in St. Helena, we will be able to bring our history to life for future generations of researchers and curious descendents. We will preserve and care for the recordings and the transcripts and make them accessible to the public.

So far, we have identified over one hundred individuals in the community with important stories to tell us. These unique memories will help us all gain a personal glimpse into St. Helena’s past.

If you are interested in the next training workshop in September or have names to submit for an oral history interview, please contact Gwen Becker, Oral History Program Coordinator, at 942-0940 or [gcbnapa@sbcglobal.net](mailto:gcbnapa@sbcglobal.net)

### WELCOME TO: CORNERSTONE

Beginning today, you can look to this space in every issue of our newsletter for information on the planning and development of the St Helena History Center. You will find regular updates, opportunities for involvement and answers to questions we receive from you about the Center.

The question we hear most is: Where is the St. Helena History Center going to be? Well, we can't answer that yet. We can tell you that the consensus from our members and Charter Advisers is that it must be: 1. Close to downtown, 2. Adjacent or within easy walking distance of other community serving amenities like the library, senior center and any future community center facility, and 3: That it augment, not duplicate facilities offered at those institutions. We are investigating several possibilities.

We are also busy combining our concepts and the ideas we have received from you into a "Core Visitor Experience" Statement. This document describes the key purposes and scope of activities to be offered at the Center. It also characterizes how we want people to feel there and what we hope they will take away from their visit. This is the fundamental background piece that will describe the concept for the Center to potential major donors. It will also be the baseline data for architectural design, so that the physical facility that is constructed or remodeled to house us will be an integral part of the experience.

It is really about knowing our constituent community and taking care that we provide the kind of experience that compels us all to come to the center, stay awhile, return often, and bring friends. In a way, it's like building a home away from home for all of St. Helena where our photos and art are on the refrigerator and the stories of our ancestors and the way they led their lives get passed down to future generations and shared with guests.

Your ideas are always welcome. We will also use this space to let you know how you can put your handprints in the wet cement of this new community "home."

## PHOTO GALLERY



Babe McCormick Learned with buggy donated to the Historical Society. The buggy is from the McCormick Ranch and dates from the mid 1800s.



Frank Harrison, board member, visits with guests at Annual Meeting & Dinner on the White Barn lawn.

## CALENDAR

Call our voicemail to reserve a space: 707-967-5502. See our website: [www.shstory.org](http://www.shstory.org)

### June

**June 5:** Bale Mill Tour, 3:00 at the Old Bale Mill. Reservations required.

**June 23:** Augustus Starr, Civil War Veteran headstone dedication, at noon, St. Helena Public Cemetery.

### July

**July 19 and 20:** Board of Directors annual retreat. Place and time TBD.

### Aug

**Aug 6:** Board of Directors quarterly meeting, 5:00, Library Community Room.

### September

**Sep 4:** General Meeting with program TBD, watch for email and announcement in next newsletter.

### October

**Oct 2:** General Meeting with program TBD, watch for email and announcement in next newsletter.

### November

**Nov 3:** "Crimes and Misdemeanors" Annual Tour of St. Helena Cemetery

**Nov 5:** Board of Directors quarterly meeting, 5:00, Library Community Room.

### December

**Dec. 4:** Annual Christmas Party, time and location, TBA

### *Mission Statement*

**The St. Helena Historical Society is a public educational organization. Its mission is to collect, preserve, exhibit, and provide access to historical materials of all kinds from our community as well as to promote public awareness and participation in the collection of such materials.**

CALIFORNIA  
CAVALRY PRESENTS

CIVIL WAR  
MEMORIAL  
AND MARKER  
DEDICATION  
FOR  
AUGUSTUS  
STARR

Saturday, June 23  
At noon

St. Helena Historical Society  
P.O. Box 87  
St. Helena, CA 94574