

The Post Office building was moved to its present site to make way for urban development. Before it was set down on the site, an archaeological "dig" was performed. Herewith is the story found on the land that the old building now sits. It is literally the Old Post Office Story- from the ground up!

THE CONTENTS OF MRS. MENELEE'S WELL

By Mary Praetzellis

Archaeologists excavate and study the material remains of past peoples. These cultures are often very old, as suggested by the Greek root "archaeo" meaning "ancient" or "primitive." Sometimes archaeologists unearth magnificent finds, such as those exhibited at the 1975 Chinese Exhibition at the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco or at the more recent Tutankhemum display. Contemporary archaeologists, however, are not only interested in the spectacular, nor do they confine their studies to "ancient" peoples. One segment of the discipline is concerned with the remains of the recent past, some of which is within living memory. Foremost among the goals of this group of historical archaeologists is the creation of a more complete and human history, based on information gathered about the day to day experiences of ordinary people as gained by sifting through their garbage. Locally, a archaeological excavation unearthed a well shaft filled with items discarded by an early Santa Rosa family. Seen in the light of information from old documents,

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this "garbage" evokes a sometimes vivid picture of the family's way of life and their struggle for survival.

In February of 1979, Mr. Dan Peterson, a Santa Rosa preservation architect, working on behalf of the City of Santa Rosa Housing and Redevelopment Agency, contracted with the archaeological consulting firm of Greenwood and Associates for a program of archaeological observation during the excavation of the foundation and basement for a new site for the Old Santa Rosa Post Office; this early twentieth century building was subsequently pulled, quite remarkably, along tracks from its original position on the corner of Fifth and A Streets to its current one on Seventh Street between A and B Streets. While observing the foundation excavation for the building, archaeologist Adrian Praetzellis located a filled-in well shaft containing nineteenth century glass, ceramics, and foot bone. In order not to delay the construction work, he quickly excavated

the feature and recovered the artifacts it contained. Unfortunately, the well had previously been dug into, probably around 1972, by bottle-hunters, who had backfilled the shaft with its original contents--minus the whole bottles. Due to this misfortune, our knowledge of the family who had originally produced the refuse is not as complete as it might have been.

However, through research with early maps and Deed Books, the well deposit was linked to a particular date and family--the Menefees. James Menefee and Sarah Menefee were born in Kentucky of Kentuckian parents. From the mid 1850s until 1864 the family lived and probably farmed in Missouri. In 1864 Mr. and Mrs. Menefee and their seven children moved to Santa Rosa. A large group of Mrs. Menefee's natal family, the Hardestys, composed of at least five of her eleven brothers and sisters and their mother, also moved to the Santa Rosa area at this time. Initially, life must have been difficult. The Menefees' three year old daughter, Laura, died shortly after the family's arrival in town. Within the next 11 years, Mrs. Menefee lost two more children during their early years: a daughter Polly in 1872 and a son Arthur in 1875.

The Menefees/Hardestys were, apparently, among the large number of Southern small farmers who moved west in the wake of the Civil War and found it impossible to reestablish their former way of life. The Hardestys rented or sharecropped two farms near Santa Rosa in 1870. One household contained a brother, his wife, and their three small children, and the other was made up of Sarah's mother, three brothers, one sister, and the eldest brother's wife. Each brother reported a small amount of personal property, probably composed mainly of livestock, on the 1870 census return. These amounts, between \$300 and \$1000 would have been insufficient to purchase nearby farmland and the brothers appear to have moved outside of the Santa Rosa Township during the mid-1870s, when the rapid growth of the area probably increased the price of renting, let alone buying farmland, to beyond their means.

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The Great Register of 1867, the voter registration list for that time, showed James Menefee's occupation as "farmer"--perhaps indicating that he was in partnership with the Hardestys. Their farming venture may have been too limited to support so large a group, and the gift to them of a house in 1867 from Sarah's brother, Henry, established the Menefees in a city environment. Sarah's brother deeded Lot 20 of Kessing's addition in Santa Rosa to Sarah and her children under the provision that she neither "...mortgage, nor sell...it." This contingency, forbidding the sale or mortgage or the property, accounts in part for the Menefees' long period of residence and for their success in avoiding one of the major pitfalls facing struggling property owners of the late nineteenth century: that is, the loss of home and property due to bad debts.

By 1870, James Menefee had found an occupation more suited to his family's new urban life: James was listed as a "paperhanger" on the U.S. Census of that year. He was also by this time the father of nine living children. Even though California was in economic depression during the 1870s and unemployment in northern cities was rampant, Santa Rosa was a growing town. Between 1870, the year of the completion of the San Francisco and Northern Pacific Railroad line to Santa Rosa, and 1874, the town's population increased 300 percent. The new houses necessitated by this rapid influx of people must have ensured Mr. Menefee work in his new trade. By 1880, both Mr. Menefee and his second son described themselves as "painters" on the U.S. Census. In an 1884 Santa Rosa Business Directory, "J. Menefee" was listed under "Painters, Paper-hangers and Kalsominers." (Calcimine was an early trade name for a kind of white or colored wash; hence, Mr. Menefee also worked as a white-washer.) The family-centered and independent nature of their new business seems especially suited to these ex-farmers.

Mrs. Menefee was a devoted member of the Christian Church for some 50 years, both in the South and in Santa Rosa. The presence of a church of this denomination in Santa Rosa may have been one reason

why the Menefee/Hardesty family choose to settle here. This movement originated in the rural Southern and Midwestern states and was brought west by emigrants, mainly farmers from Missouri and Kentucky. Organized in 1854, the Christian Church of Santa Rosa built its first place of worship in 1857 on the corner of Fourth and B Streets, just two blocks from the Menefees' home. In 1880, the church had a membership of 160, and a Sunday School which attracted some 80 pupils, most probably including a number of Menefee children.

City and county tax assessment listings for the Menefees, for nearly every year of their residency between 1868 and 1891, provide us with an accurate economic profile of the family. These documents indicate that the family was struggling but solvent. That the assessed value of their furniture doubled within this period suggests that, as they became established in town, and as the Menefee children grew up and went to work, the family could afford more of the comforts of life. The addition, in 1882, of a piano suggests that the family had achieved both financial stability and productive leisure time. The Menefees owned a horse, stabled in the backyard, and a wagon which was necessary to their independent status as painters. The ownership of a sewing machine is further evidence of the family's self-sufficiency. Thus, according to their occupational group and financial conditions, the Menefees can be thought of as striving members of the lower-middle class.

As to their ethnicity, Mr. and Mrs. Menefee were, at least, second generation Kentuckian. The distinctiveness and persistence of Southern culture extended beyond their unique accent to other traits such as food habits, religion, and social and political activities. The Menefees, therefore, can be viewed also as members of an immigrant ethnic group bringing with them a distinctive way of life which they had to adapt somewhat to "fit in" in a Western town. As will be seen, the family kept much of their Southern heritage intact.

While the documentary records gives a continuous, though distant, profile of certain aspects of the Menefees' way of

life, their archaeological remains supply tangible objects discarded by the family at a single point in time. In the fall of 1873, the Santa Rosa Water Works brought piped water into the city. It does not appear that the Menefees were among the original subscribers to this water company, for, although available, piped water cost money and may have been beyond reach of many Santa Rosans. The presence of piped water within the town does seem to have subsequently changed the family's form of water supply, for the date of artifacts within the Menefees' well indicate that it went out of use shortly after the creation of this new system. Thus, the Menefees' now outmoded well became a hole in need of filling. Ash from the fireplace and kitchen garbage supplied some of the necessary bulk; however, as often happens in such cases, this new catch-all inspired the family to do a certain amount of "housecleaning". Aside from refuse and broken goods, the family discarded a number of undamaged items, probably viewed by them as unfashionable or unnecessary. This housecleaning occurred when the family had lived in the house a little over five years, at a time when they were in the midst of adjusting to life in a Western town. Some of the stresses of this situation and the means by which the family coped with them can be seen by studying the artifacts recovered from their well.

The Menefees' discarded ceramics (plate 1) are notable for their lack of



decoration, and the simple, functional, durable and inexpensive nature of the pieces. There are no printed or painted items, no fancy or ostentatious pieces whatsoever. Of course, any fancy items would probably have been used only on special occasions, and thus be less

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liable to breakage and unlikely to have been discarded undamaged during "housecleaning." A large proportion of the Menefees' tableware was of a variety described by contemporary potters and merchants as "Ironstone China," produced throughout the nineteenth century in Staffordshire, England. Vessels such as these could have been purchased locally at the store of "Wise & Goldfish" on Main Street or at that of "E.T. Farmer & Co." in the "Plaza," as well as other establishments either local or far afield. The use of the word "china" in "Ironstone China" does not indicate the porcelain or bone china highly prized by collectors, but a type of cheap, plain, and durable white earthenware, mass produced and widely exported by hundreds of Staffordshire potteries in the nineteenth century. The quality, color, design, and, of course, price of ceramics distributed by these companies varied considerably. Some potters, for instance, created a slightly grey ceramic in imitation of French porcelain, which is currently described by some as "Opaque Porcelain." This variety was probably more expensive than "Ironstone China." By the 1860s the craze for transfer printed ceramics, particularly blue, had passed, and white or slightly grey vessels of molded design were in vogue. Some of these forms are sought currently by antique collectors, and include vessels with fruit, flower, grain, and geometrical designs molded around the vessel's exterior or plate rim. These designs were often registered with the British Patent Office.

Of the 16 plates reconstructed from the well collection, 13 were plain and only three had molded rim patterns. Two of these molded rim plates had been in use for over a decade prior to their disposal; they include a "Decagon" plate registered by the Davenport Company in 1852, and a "Sydenham Shape" plate registered by T. & R. Boote in 1853. Of the 12 reconstructed cups in the collection, eight were multi-sided, three were plain, and one had a molded design and entwined handle. Complementing the multi-sided cups, five saucers with panelled interiors and three plain saucers were reconstructed. A serving set was made up of three Opaque Porcelain vessels. These vessels, made by Baker &

Co., bore a molded leaf design similar to the popular "Fig" pattern registered by Davenport in the 1850s and 1860s. The Baker & Co. vessels, however, were noticeably inferior to the Davenport vessels that have been seen by the author.

From this evidence it appears that the Menefees bought their dishes in lots of perhaps a half dozen vessels at a time. The plates are all very similar, but bear the marks of different Staffordshire potters: two are from Henry Alcock, four from James Edwards & Son, and four from Cokson & Cetwynd. In purchasing replacements for a plain plate, the manufacturer need not have been duplicated in order to retain the appearance of a matched set. The same is true for the panelled saucers; the five pieces in this collection, bearing three different makers' marks, could have been used together as a set. Aside from the two molded rim "heirloom" type plates described above, the Menefees set their table with plain plates, and plain and panelled cups and saucers. Their serving vessels were slightly more ostentatious, as they were of a lighter body and decorated with an imitation of the very popular "Fig" pattern. Thus, although making an effort to be fashionable, the Menefees seem to have purchased mainly ceramics of the cheapest varieties. During this period, porcelain cost many times the price of earthenware. Only one porcelain cup, of a design exactly the same as their "Ironstone China" cups, was recovered from the Menefees' well, a further indicator of their desires to be frugal, slightly fashionable, and aesthetically balanced in their tablesetting.

Although the Menefees' ceramics may tell us something about their economic condition and social aspirations, they remain mute with regard to the family's Southern origin. This affiliation, however, may be reflected in the family's eating habits as reconstructed from bones recovered from the well. The use of pork for food in the South is proverbial. Southern farmers looked on the hog as a symbol of success and sought pork with more vigor than any other food. It has been estimated that the average Southerner ate three times as much pork as beef in the middle of the nineteenth century.

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During this period pork was more common and less expensive than beef in the Eastern United States. The situation was reversed here in the West, where the overall consumption of pork was much lower and pork prices approximated those of middle price beef cuts.

Nearly equal amounts of pork and beef bones were recovered from the Menefees' well. This is an unusually high proportion of pork for Westerners in general. When the prices of the cuts of meat are compared, it becomes clear that the Menefees preferred pork to similarly priced beef cuts. When purchasing mid-priced cuts the family usually chose ham over similarly priced cuts of beef. Aside from ham, their meat cuts were predominantly in the lowest price range. Nearly half of their beef cuts were made up of foreshank and hindshank which ranked as the cheapest cuts of the period. Used in soups and stews, these shank bones sold for a few cents a pound and were even discarded by some, including Sonoma County's Skaggs Springs Resort. The family's consumption of pig's feet and tongue indicate both ethnic preference and economic standing since these were the cheapest pork cuts and were savored by Southerners. The family's use of pork tongue was shown by the fragments of mandible bones found in the well; these remains were of a very inexpensive meal. The Menefees may have purchased the hog's head and butchered and extracted the tongue from it at home. It is also possible that they made hogs-head cheese, another very Southern dish.

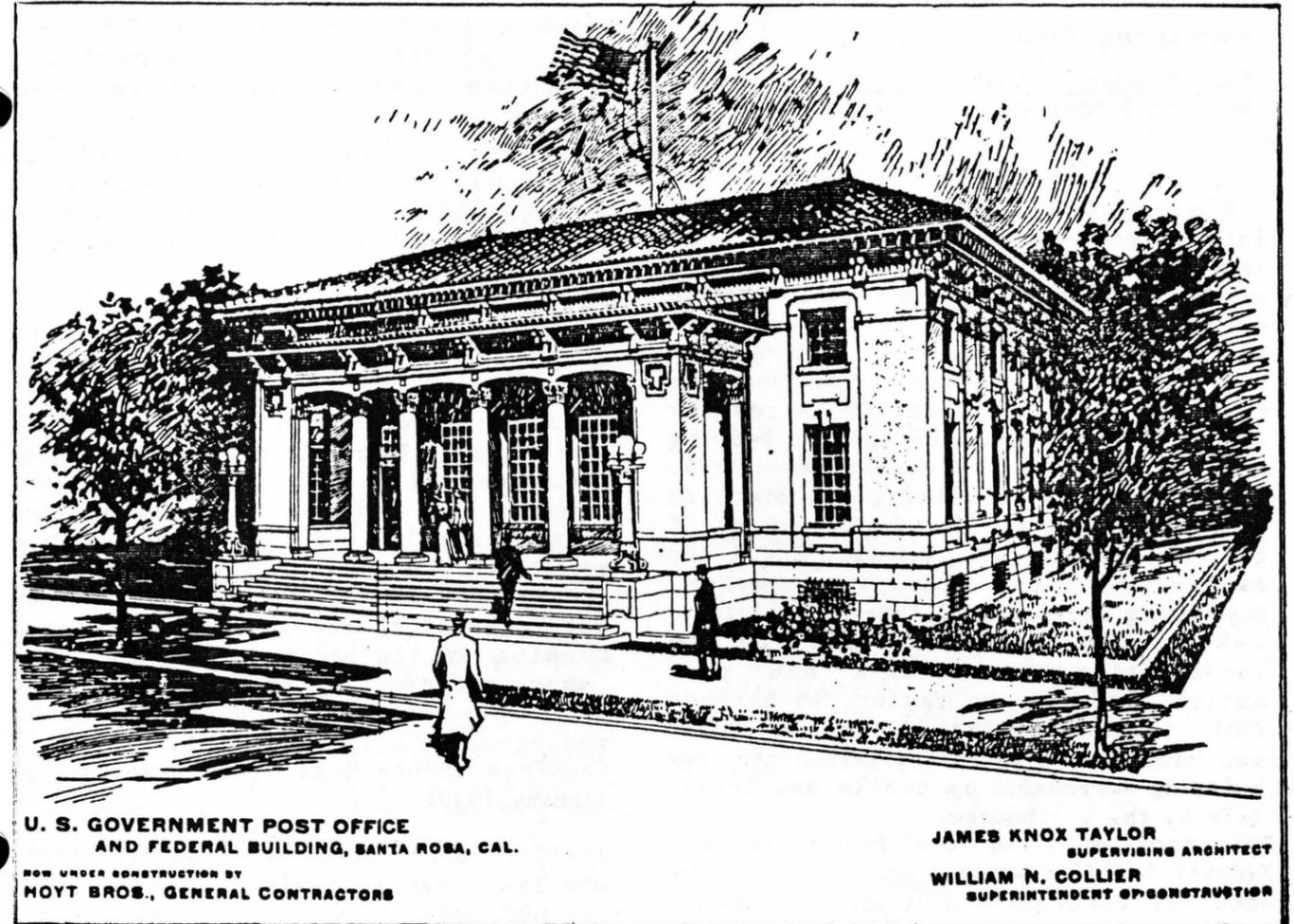
At the time the well was backfilled, the Menefee family, numbering eight individuals, evidently selected their meat cuts for economy, and for those pieces which would feed the entire family as soups and stews, rather than those which had been cut into individual portions, such as steaks. In the Southern tradition, ham was a family staple, although they also ate cheaper pork cuts.

Postscript

In 1891, with all of their eight children grown up and married, James and Sarah Menefee moved to Portland, Oregon, where four of their children now lived. Mrs. Menefee continued to be an active member of the Christian Church of that

city. In 1893 James Menefee was killed in an "electric car" accident in Portland. Sarah brought his remains back to Santa Rosa for burial in the family plot, sold her house for \$850, and returned to Portland, where she died the following year. According to her obituary the "remains of this estimable lady" were returned to Santa Rosa to be buried in the Rural Cemetery with those of her husband and children.

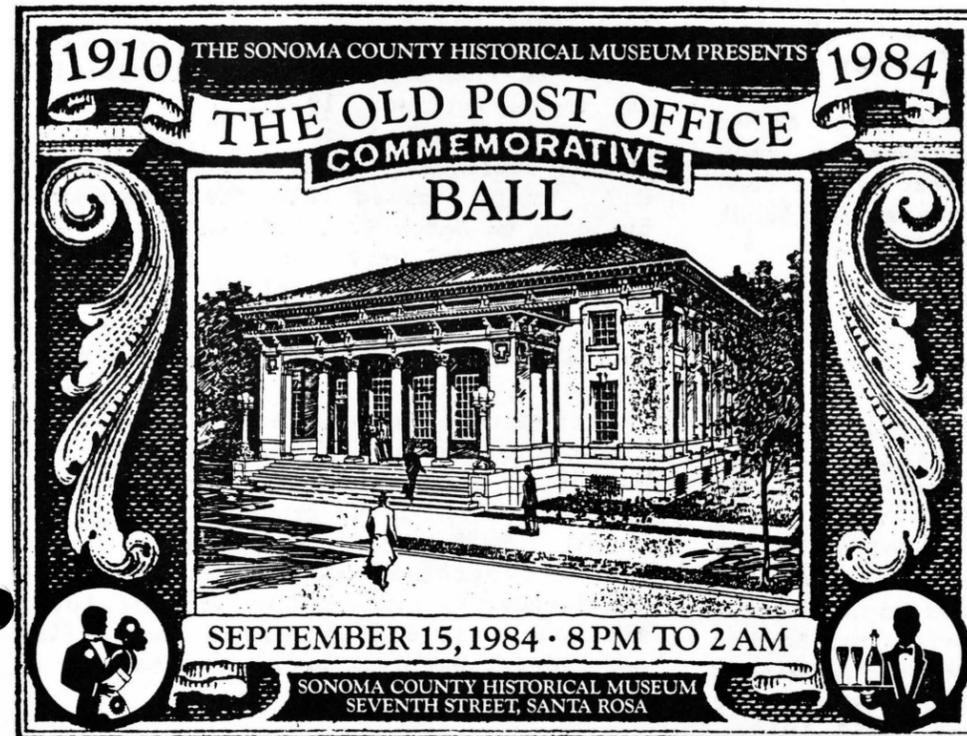
This family of rural Southerners had made a home for themselves in Santa Rosa; Mrs. Menefee's funeral notice described her as a "well-known and much beloved resident." Now, scattered references in official documents and two archive boxes filled with their discards are the only testimonials to the family's existence; even their family tombstone has fallen down and become overgrown with weeds (plate 2). Perhaps, through these few scraps recovered from their well, this family, representatives of a forgotten group in American history, can contribute to the present understanding of the lives of ordinary folks in the past.



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ABOVE: From Dan Peterson's book Santa Rosa's Old Post Office, 1979.

LEFT: Artist David Bacigalupi's use of the original as the basis for the invitation to the Old Post Office Ball.