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. MENEEFEE'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 "arche" 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 Tutankhamen 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, an 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, 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 nineeenth century glass, ceramics, and foci 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 contracted orsharecropped 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 along buying farmland, to beyond their means.

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 "Papers, paper-hangers and Kalsominers." ("Kalsominer" 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 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 South, particularly in 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 Menefee's home. With 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 1866 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 with 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 outdated well became a hole in need of filling. Ash from the fireplace and kitchen garbage supplied some of the necessary fuel. However, 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 unfinished or unnecessary. This housecleaning, performed 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, was probably more extensive than necessary. This housecleaning occurred 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 unfinished or unnecessary. This housecleaning, performed 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, was probably more extensive than necessary.

The Menefees' discarded ceramics (plate 1) are notable for their lack of decoration, and the simple, functional, durable and inexpensive nature of the pieces. These vessels included items, no fancy or ostentatious pieces whatsoever. Of course, any fancy items were probably used only on special occasions, and thus be less liable to breakage and unlikely to have been discarded undamaged during "housecleaning." The perception 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 "K.T. Farmer & Co." on Main Street or at that of "R.T. Farmer & Co." in "The Plaza," as well as other establishments either local or far afield. While 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 enjoyed by hundreds of Staffordshire potteries in the nineteenth century. The 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. The cups were slightly more ostentatious, as they were of a lighter body and decorated with an imitation of the very popular "Fig" pattern. Another possibility is that they ate three times as much pork as beef. Some 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 172 cups in the collection, eight were multi-sided, three were plain, and one had a molded design and entwined handle. Complementing the panelled interiors and three plain saucers were reconstructed. A serving set, made up of three drop handle "Ironstone China" cups, was recovered from the Menefees' well, a further indicator of the family's form of water supply, for the presence of piped water within the town does seem to have subsequently changed the family's form of water supply, for the presence of piped water within the town does seem to have subsequently changed the family's form of water supply. 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 enjoyed by hundreds of Staffordshire potteries in the nineteenth century.
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 middle 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 hogshead cheese, another very Southern dish.

At the time the well was backfilled, the Menefees 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 testaments 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.


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