

Livermore Valley History Center

Chapters of Livermore History

The Armstrong Family of Collier Canyon

by Janet Newton



Taken in Livermore, July 4, 1873

Back row: Matilda Bell Armstrong, Annie Armstrong, John
and Joseph Armstrong;
Front row: Mattie Armstrong, Bob (on mother's lap) and
Jim (on father's lap).

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House in Ireland where John Armstrong was born.



Ploughing in Collier Canyon, Dave McClearnon.



Old house in Collier Canyon.



Cutting hay.



New house in Collier Canyon.

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In the early 1800s there were a number of families in Northern Ireland who were thinking about emigrating to a new country. Times were hard in Europe. There was unemployment, political strife and in 1846 in Ireland, there was a failure of the potato crop that caused great hardship. Eventually it meant actual starvation for some people.

But apart from a need for betterment, there was also the excitement of something new and the thrill of dangerous exploits that lured people to America. Great numbers of people came who were both rich and poor. The United States attracted emigrants even before gold was discovered in California, but after that momentous event, it was a magnet that could scarcely be resisted.

The closely connected Northern Irish families that settled in the Livermore Valley all knew each other in Ireland. Their homes were in the town of Omagh, County Tyrone.

Margaret Bell left her home in Omagh in 1852. In 1861 she returned for a visit and her brother John wrote a poem in honor of the occasion. He said "When...you did return; your other sisters they were gone..."

Eliza Bell McDonald was in the Bay area in the 1850s. Matilda Bell married John Armstrong in Omagh in 1860 and the couple set sail for America soon afterwards. They said that they got the news of Lincoln's election by megaphone from another ship as it passed them at sea.

Margaret Bell Adams crossed the plains in a covered wagon, possibly in the 1850s. If so, she had a long journey back to Ireland for her visit in 1861. In 1873 she was living in San Leandro, California, with her husband James Adams and her mother.

Her brother John Bell, the writer of the poem, stayed at home and cultivated his farm. We have later photos of him outside his house with his grown-up children.

John Armstrong's parents emigrated to Ohio and settled in Nilestown in 1863. Evidently quite a few members of the Armstrong family settled in Ohio. But John and Matilda went further west, to Missouri, where John farmed near the town of Mexico for ten years. It was here that he became a United States citizen.

The McKelvey family of Omagh was in the United States in the 1850s. Their son Samuel was born in Philadelphia in 1854. But when he was six weeks old his

And on the other side is the note from "Papa."

"Well, Jim,

I thought as I wasn't doing much I would drop a line. Tilly was taken sick Saturday night. Archy went after Eliza and they had to come on the sled. Tilda was pretty bad. The baby was born Sunday at 1 o'clock. She is getting along nicely now, but she is pretty weak. The old woman will stay for a week and take care of her and the baby. Well Jim this is great farming weather. I have been trying to plough but us two can't plough as much as we ought to and there is no telling when we can touch it again. It is now raining like vengeance. We will have plenty of grass in a week if the frost don't hurt it. You can tell Mrs. C. that Archy is here and well. He is going to help me through if it takes all summer.

With respects to all

J. Armstrong"

In 1878 there was tragedy in the McDonald family. Eliza Bell and her son Jim and daughter Belle all died of diptheria. According to the newspaper report, young James became ill with the dread disease and then his mother. When told of James's death, Eliza put her hands together in prayer. Two hours later she was dead. The night following the death of her mother and brother, little Belle complained of feeling ill. As the funeral was leaving the house the following Sunday, Belle was on her deathbed. Eliza was 40 years old. Jimmy was nine and Belle fourteen.

In spite of heartbreak and hardship the families prospered in their farming. The children attended the Inman school at the bottom of Doolan Canyon which was the next little valley. Afterwards they went to the Livermore College which was a private high school. (It was closed when the public high school was opened in Livermore in August, 1891.)

In the spring of 1878, the Armstrong family attended a "Complimentary Concert" for the benefit of the Livermore College, given by the Amicitie Musical Club of San Francisco.

I wonder how often the family went into town, and how long it took them to travel the six or seven miles in their horse-drawn vehicles on primitive roads. (There are photos of the vehicles in the family album.) Did they stay in town to have a meal I wonder? I think there were plenty of restaurants.

Mrs. Isabella McGeehon, who was born and raised (though at a later date) on the Crosby Ranch about fifteen miles south of Livermore, said in answer to a question about what farm families did when they went into town, "Very simple - they did what they had to do or wanted to do. Shopping for groceries, farming equipment, getting horses shod if the home place did not afford such facilities, post office, bank, maybe calling on friends - a fast-stepping team was an asset. Loaded wagons were a slow tedious trip of course." In another letter Mrs. McGeehon says that once when the whole family went in for the Fourth of July, (all seven of them), her father made a reservation for them to have dinner at Malley's restaurant.

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Three years later, in 1881, the Armstrong family again spent an evening at the College. This time for graduation exercises. The program does not give a list of the graduates, but the Armstrong's neighbor Miss Inman's name appears three times. Joseph Armstrong graduated two years later, in 1883.

Annie Armstrong's autograph album contains numerous beautifully written tokens of affection. Some were from family members living in Marin County and one from Mrs. M. J. Colwell recalls "a stage ride over the mountains."

About this time Sam McKelvey left Omagh and joined his father on his ranch near Altamont, a town several miles east of Livermore. Sam no doubt visited all the valley families that had come from Tyrone, including, of course, the Armstrong family. In 1886, Sam and Annie Armstrong were married.

Looking in the family scrap book we see there is a program of the graduating exercises of the Livermore Public School of 1885. The music was by the Livermore Cornet Band. The main address was by Dr. Albert S. Cook, Professor of English Literature at the University of California. We do not know which member of the Armstrong family was in the class.

Sam McKelvey decided to take a job as a foreman of a ranch in Amador County. His wife stayed with her family until Sam built a house for her near the town of Plymouth. Annie had a baby daughter, her second child, on August 7, 1888. Sam wrote to her:

"21st August, 1888

My own dear Annie,

I write you a few lines to let you know that I am in good health, hoping that this will find you and my little pet in good health. I was glad to hear of our baby being so good. I hope it will not get spoiled down there. The house is going up pretty lively. They are putting on the roof today, and I tell you it is going to be a nice house, just as nice as any in the Livermore Valley. There are 5 carpenters working at it. Please excuse this as I am in a great hurry going to Plymouth for some lumber, so I thought I would send you a word or two. When are you coming home? I send you the Amador Ledger. You can see about the house in it. No more at present from your own dear old hub, with kisses for you and our little pet. Don't forget, but kiss her for me and she can kiss you for me.

With love to all,

Sam

P.S. Will you send last week's Herald to William Robinson for me? Address,
Wm. Robinson
Anney Beragh
Co. Tyrone, Ireland."

Sam and Annie's first child had been born and had died in 1887.

John Armstrong's mother wrote a letter from Nilestown, Ohio, in 1887:

"My dear son and daughter,

After a long absence in writing, I now sit to try to write a few lines to you to let you know that I am still alive but can't brag much. For I am both weak and feeble. It is now going on six months since I fell down stairs and broke my left arm about two inches above the wrist. I think I fell with my open hand against the wall for when Ann and Ed carried me to a chair my arm was bent back like a hoop and my hand was turned straight up. The doctor was here in a short time and set my arm. But John dear, that was a stand for your poor old mother. I wore the splinters for six weeks and I was lazy for ten weeks when I was in bed on the sore side, with my arm stretched out on a pillow. But they lifted me every morning and set me on a chair and I can't neither dress nor undress since my fingers is stiff and I can't bend them and I don't think I'll even be able to use by hand. Tilda you may think of the time that Ann has had and if she was well herself it would not be so bad, but she is far from well. She always takes them dizzy spells and everything will be flying before her and then she gets sick. Now John I want you to write to me and don't wait on me. I hope that you and your family is all well. The folks here is well, and Willy has got to be the happy father of another fine young son. They call him Willy. Now he has three sons and three daughters, Aimey, Sady, Jinny, Sammy Robert and Willy. I hope you will excuse my short letter and mistakes for I am not in a good way of writing. I send my love to you and your wife and family and to Davy Bell in the kindest manner and may God bless you all. Amen. I remain as ever your loving Mother to death,

Ann Armstrong

Write soon and give me all the news you can and lots about the old country."

Grandma Armstrong wrote another letter in 1889:

"Niles, February 4, 1889

My dear son and daughter,

As you requested me to write you a few lines I will try and do as well as I can. Indeed John if you saw me you would be sorry to see me so feeble and weak. I can't go from one room to another without help. I sit in my chair nearly all the time and when I rise if someone doesn't catch me I would fall, no command of myself at all. But I hope it is for some good purpose the Lord has spared me so long and when it is his will to take me off this world he'll take me home to dwell with him in glory. I trust dear John that we will all live so that some day we will all meet in heaven where we'll never say good by. Tilda you say you had a lonely Christmas. That is just the way when we get old and needs the company of our children, they are all gone. Your brothers and sisters is all as well as usual. Poor Annie is not a day well and she has a great burden of me. And her and her husband is good and kind to me. I hope the Lord will reward them. And Willy is doing well in his store and he is a good little soul. The Cleveland folk is all well and Davy wants you to write to him. I send my love to Mrs. Adams and to Davy Bell and to you and your wife and family and may God bless one and all is the prayer of your poor old mother. So I bid you good by and I may say for ever. Please write soon and give us all the news.

Ann Armstrong"

The Livermore Valley was developing rapidly during this time. Homesteaders from many lands and many parts of the United States came to settle and to engage in business. It was an area that attracted people from Denmark as well as from Ireland, and a large Danish colony gradually developed in Livermore.

One couple who had a ranch on the gently hilly land east of Livermore were Mads and Bertha Hansen. They were both born in Denmark about 1844 and they began their married life in Denmark. But they soon emigrated to the Livermore Valley. In 1889 a son was born to them on the ranch on the Tesla Road. He was christened Arthur Rufus. The Hansens were quite prosperous and when Mads Hansen died he was able to leave each of his eleven children 60 acres of farm land. The Hansens were good friends of the Armstrongs of Collier Canyon.

Another Danish family lived just over the hill from the Armstrongs, in Doolan Canyon. Andrew Block's family knew the Armstrongs quite well. Annie Block, Andrew's young daughter, liked to walk over the hill to play with her chum Ora Armstrong.

But families moved around. The McKelveys, for example, were living in San Francisco in 1890. They had an attractive, typically San Francisco house. Sam became the Master of King Solomon's Lodge of the Masons. When he retired in 1901, he was given a beautiful set of silver.

Three McKelvey children were born in San Francisco and two died there of scarlet fever. Roseann McKelvey was five years old when she died and John was nine.

On December 31, 1899, the McKelveys saw the New Year in on Market Street and it was lively and noisy. But in 1902, Sam McKelvey's health was poor and they moved back to Livermore to a house on North P Street.

Tragic illnesses were common in those days and there were many sad times in the Armstrong family. For example, in the family of Matilda Armstrong the wife of William Tocher (a man of Scotch descent) in 1901 their two children got typhoid fever. Their mother nursed them back to health but then succumbed to the disease herself and died. It was pitiful to hear the children calling for their mother. Their aunt, Ora Armstrong Beck, took them into her home and raised them.

John Armstrong's eldest son, Joseph, had a distinguished career in teaching, most of it as a school principal. His last school was in Elmhurst, San Leandro. He retired from it in 1907 at which time he became a real estate developer in the Hayward area. He developed the Kimball Ranch and the Smalley estate. He became the President of the Hayward Chamber of Commerce and a Town Trustee. He was the City Clerk at one time and the head of the Hayward Red Cross.

His son, Newton Wesley Armstrong, studied at Oxford for a year after finishing his college work in California. He became well known as the Alameda County Development Secretary, which post he held for 28 years. He entered the National Guard in 1909 and became a Colonel in 1946 after having seen active service on the Mexican border and in World Wars I and II. He landed with the troops in Normandy in 1944.

Col. Armstrong originated the annual flower show at the California State Fair and he was closely connected with the Alameda County exhibits at State Fairs.

Col. Armstrong was named for his uncle, Newton W. Armstrong, who was born in Collier Canyon. In 1906, Uncle Newton was a member of Livermore's Company I Regiment. He went with them to San Francisco to help out after the disastrous earthquake and fire. The red glow of the fire in San Francisco could be seen in Livermore.

In 1907 when Sweeney's Opera House was opened in Livermore, Company I put on a play and had a dance afterwards. Newton Armstrong's niece Mattie McKelvey wrote, "Newt Armstrong had a part in the play. Ora and I had awful good seats up in the front row of the gallery in the corner and we sure thought we were important."

Newton went to Mexico in 1910 to work on the Hearst Ranch and he died there in 1911.

A note in Mattie McKelvey Hansen's diary reads, "Everyone was looking at Halley's Comet. It just looked like a big streak of stars across the sky."

Evidently the Armstrongs went into Livermore on the Fourth of July in 1907 because there is an "Official Programme" in the family scrapbook. "Music by Sachau's orchestra."

There was a happy event in 1910 when Mattie McKelvey married Art Hansen, but there was more sadness in the years 1900 to 1910.

Art Hansen's mother Bertha died at the ranch house on Tesla Road. Twenty-nine year old Willy Armstrong died of pneumonia after four days illness. The seven year old daughter of Joseph Armstrong, Marybelle, died suddenly in Hayward. Father John Armstrong died of gangrene. Sam McKelvey died of a heart attack. Uncle Newton Armstrong died in Mexico and eight year old Willy McKelvey died of heart trouble after the measles.

In 1915, Annie, Mrs. Sam McKelvey, became the President of the Ladies Guild of the Presbyterian Church of Livermore. It was the year when everyone went to the Panama Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco. This was a happy time.

In 1916 Newton Armstrong was in the campaign on the Mexican border. (It was just to add confusion to the family archives, it seems to me. For example, the original John Armstrong first settled in Mexico, Missouri. His son Newton went to Mexico to the Hearst Ranch there. His nephew Newton also was in Mexico.)

1916 was notable in Mattie Hansen's diary for the fact that they had a telephone put in at the ranch!

In 1917, young Sam McKelvey joined the regular Army and was sent to Honolulu. His cousin, Ralph Armstrong, of Hayward also joined the ranks and went with the Army to France. He died in France one month before the Armistice in 1918.

Sam McKelvey got the 'flu in the epidemic of 1918, and it was thought, when he died of tuberculosis in 1920, that it was an aftermath of the 'flu.

In 1922, so Mattie Hansen tells us, everyone was saying, "Every day in every way, I am getting better and better, with knotted string."

Mads Hansen died in 1929 and Joseph Armstrong of Hayward died in 1934.

New ways were taking the place of old. "Ma" McKelvey, nee Annie Armstrong who wrote the little letter in 1873, had her own auto. There is a snapshot of her in it. Her diary also makes note of the opening of the Bay Bridge and of the Golden Gate Bridge.

Mattie Hansen went to Honolulu in 1941 to visit her daughter Roseanna and son-in-law Jack Stewart. The next year, the folks at the Hansen Ranch were awakened by some Navy men looking for German war prisoners who had escaped from a train.

In 1946, the Livermore Presbyterian Church had a 75th Anniversary celebration. Mrs. Sam McKelvey was the oldest living member of the church and she cut the birthday cake. She died not long afterwards, aged 84.

Travelling was becoming more and more popular and in 1947 cousins from Ireland came visiting the Armstrong clan. They also called on the Concannon family in Livermore.

There are still many members of the Armstrong family living in Livermore and in the Bay area.

Bibliography:

Scrap books of the Armstrong Family, lent by Mrs. Roseanna Stewart of Livermore.

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