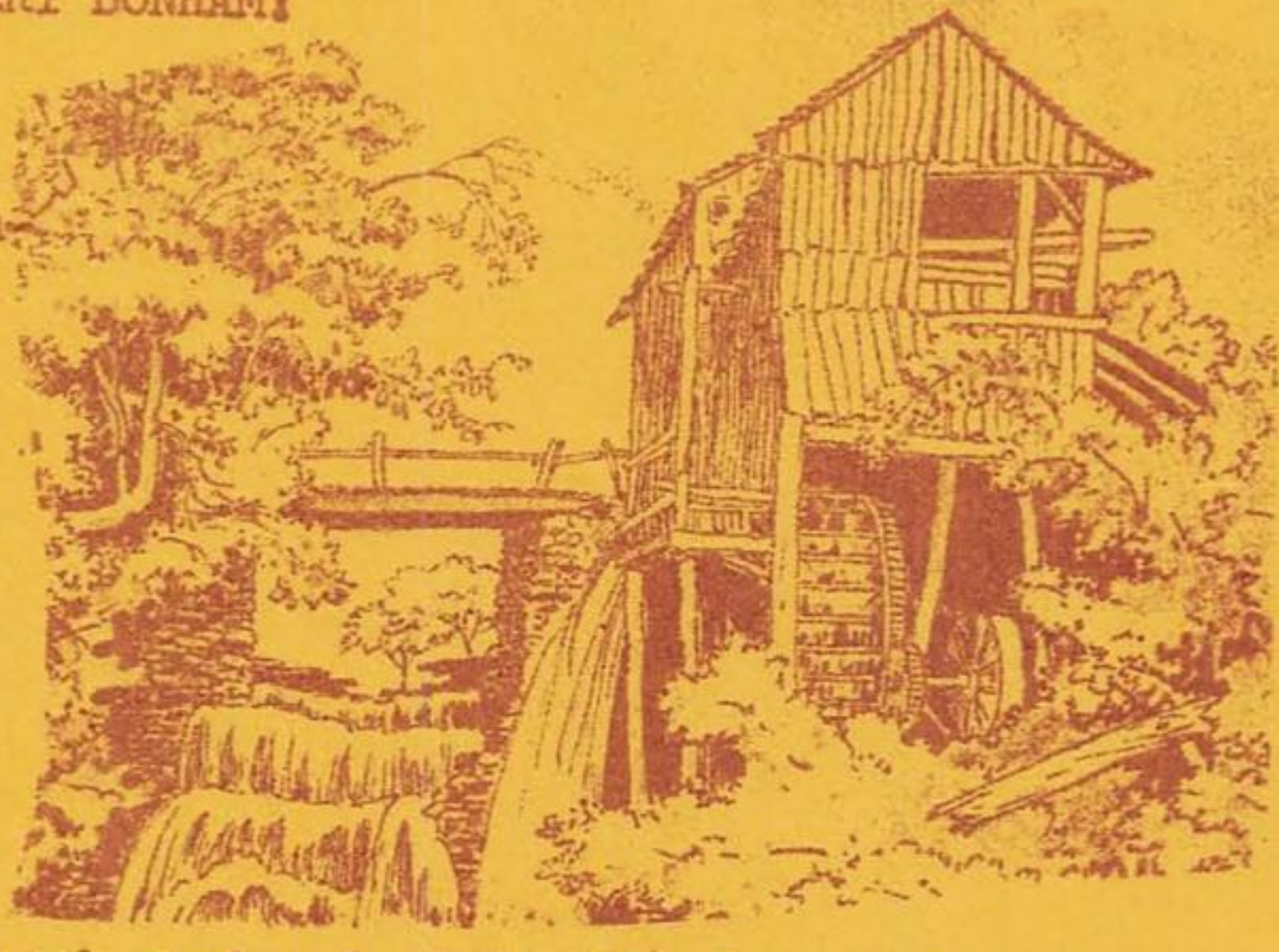


THE MURDER OF PERRY BONHAM

There are few people living in South Sierra today, I am sure, that know of Perry Bonham. Yet in the summer of '94 his name was on every lip, young and old. One of the Argonauts and almost the last survivor of that historic group in Alleghany, he had been basely murdered up on Pliocene Ridge near Shakesville.*

Any Alleghanian of that day could have told you of Perry Bonham. Leaving his native state of Pennsylvania at the age of thirty, he had joined in the gold rush to California, reaching the isolated Kanaka Creek region just in time to participate in the exciting "tunnel" boom at Smiths' Flat. He had come west by way of the Isthmus from a small town outside Pittsburgh, in the county of Allegheny. There were others at Smiths' Flat from county Allegheny and the surrounding area. Three of these were the McCormick brothers, Jim, Joe, and Lish, from Moon Run. And there was McKee, and Josiah and John Stair, John Kochenour, Horace Gilman, and S.S. Meanor, too.



Fred and Henry Smith had discovered the "breakout" of a very rich placer channel (later called the Great Blue Lead) when prospecting in one of the ravines on the north slope of Kanaka Creek. This set off a furious rush, first at Smiths' Flat, then in Wet Ravine and on the ridge between these, which later became known as Star Hill, and soon after at Cumberland. Perry soon became a member of the Keystone Company, driving a tunnel on what today is known as the Buckeye claim. Some time after, he joined another group, mostly of his fellow Pennsylvanians, on the Alleghany claim, so named after their former home county. For some unknown reason they spelled the name with an "a" instead of the "e". Actually, both spellings were commonly used back East at that time.

They collared a tunnel on Pacific ground, north of the Alleghany claim, because the ridge on their own ground would have required a much longer drive. Commencing in the spring of '53, they drove through the weathered bedrock rim and reached the gravel channel some two years later. The Pennsylvanians laid out a settlement just above their tunnel, where the slope flattened off a bit on the contact between the bedrock and the overlying gravels and volcanics. By 1857 the town had grown to the point where it was the center of activity for Cumberland, Smiths', Chips', Centerville, and even Minnesota. The post office that had been established nine months earlier at Chips' Flat was moved over to Alleghany on November 9th of that year. And now, thirty-seven years later, Perry Bonham and Jim McCormick were the last of the Pennsylvanians still alive and to be seen in the town that they had

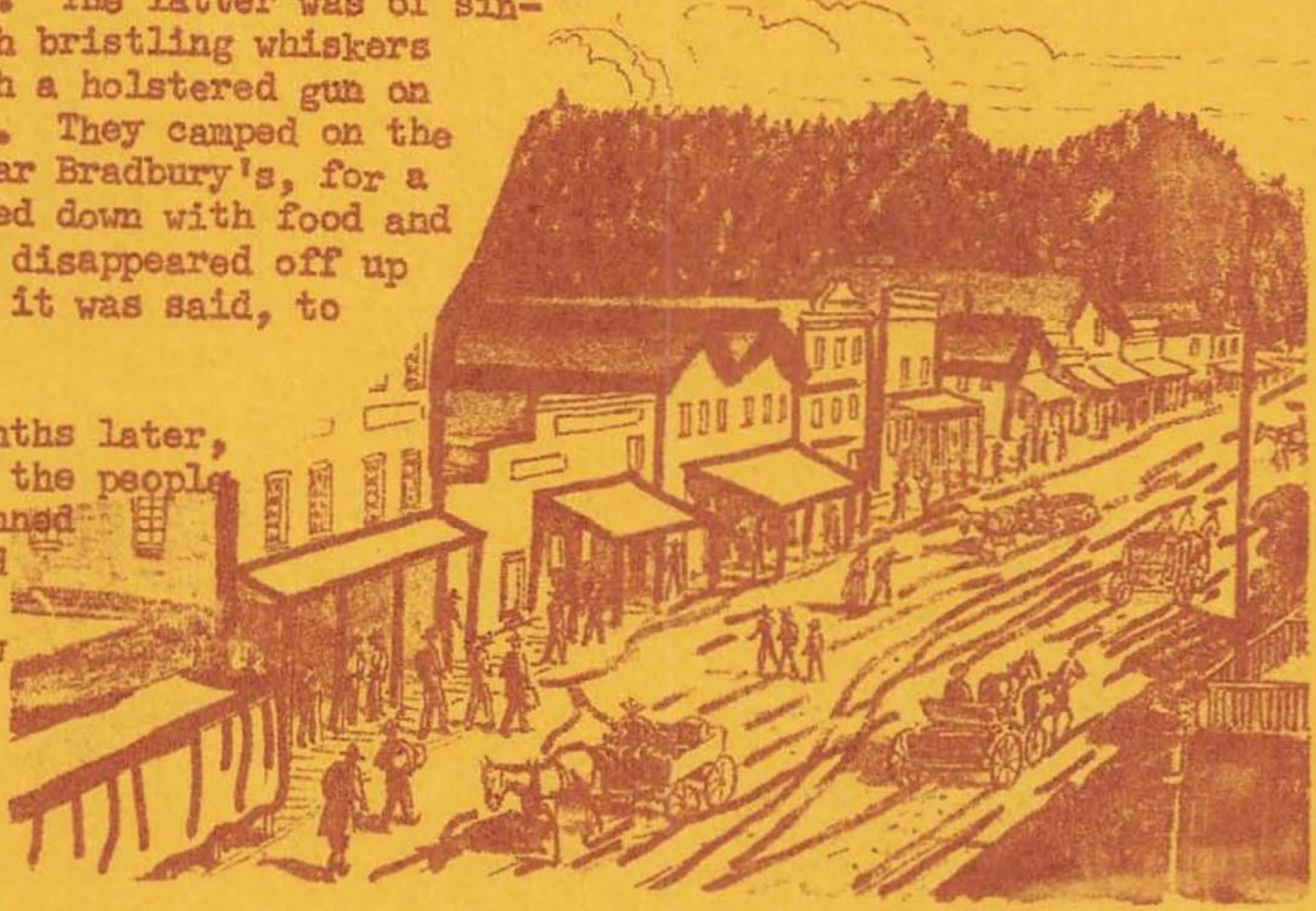
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named.

We do not know how successful Perry was in his tunnel ventures. It is probable that he did well in these, but equally probable that he ploughed back most of his earnings into later prospecting operations. That he was captivated, as many others have been, by the Alleghany country is certain, and that he was ever ready to start in on a new prospect we know. It is a good bet that he went on the Meadow Lake rush in '65 and '66. Travelers on the Forest City - Downieville trail in '79 and '80 passed close to his portal just south of City of Six, where he was running a tunnel in on a serpentine contact. He was making Alleghany his headquarters in the '80s, but in the hard winters he retreated to the valley to join his wife and son who had forsaken the rough life in the Sierran mining camp for the easier living down below.

The white-haired old man, with moustache and goatee, carrying a stout manzanita "snake stick," was a popular and well-known figure in Alleghany over those years, and was always pointed out to the newcomers as one of the founders of the town. One former resident well remembers old Perry's last trip into town, early in 1894, with a string of mules, for supplies. Accompanying him was his miner, a man by the name of H.A. Bradshaw. The latter was of sinister appearance, with bristling whiskers and a pegleg, and with a holstered gun on his belt at all times. They camped on the edge of Alleghany, near Bradbury's, for a few days. Then, loaded down with food and mining supplies, they disappeared off up the ridge on the way, it was said, to Poker Flat.

One day a few months later, May 17th to be exact, the people of Alleghany were stunned to hear that Perry had been murdered up at Mt. Vernon, only a few miles from town, by Bradshaw. Bradshaw promptly turned himself in to Sheriff Busch, claiming that he had acted in self-



defense. Old Man Bonham had fired him a while back, Bradshaw said, and things had not gone well between them since. On the morning of the 17th, he had stopped by to see Bonham, near the latter's tunnel at the head of Mt. Vernon Ravine, about some matter which had developed into an argument. Perry, he claimed, raised his stick to assault him, so Bradshaw drew his pistol and fired in defense. It was a well-aimed shot, and Perry was dead

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in a few minutes. The affair was witnessed by Jerome York who was prospecting nearby.

The long trial at Downieville was one of the big events of the year in the county seat. Attorney John Gale of Oroville came over to act for Bradshaw, and A.L. Frick, the assistant district attorney of Alameda, joined Sierra's D.A., Frank Wehe, in the prosecution before Judge Sam Davidson. The judge was no stranger to the scene of the crime, for he had been a pioneer miner and storekeeper at Chips' Flat, and later had practiced law at Cumberland before coming to Downieville. Commencing on Monday, July 23rd, the case was not handed to the jury until Friday. The jury was out for fifteen hours, and until the last few minutes it looked as though it was to be a hung jury, six to six. But then the six for conviction were won over to acquittal. Those in the know said that the last minute reasoning was to save the county the expense of another trial. In any event, the peglegged man who had so readily given himself up found sympathy and consideration from his peers.

Although the "Mountain Messenger" reported that the verdict gave general satisfaction, most Alleghanians violently disagreed. How could a 74-year old man seriously menace a vigorous and well-armed miner many years his junior with just a walking stick? Perry wasn't that sort of man anyhow.

The Masons of Forest Lodge gently laid Perry to rest in the little local cemetery. The family was represented at the quiet ceremony by son J.W. Bonham of Oakland. But the shocking death of this pioneer citizen and Bradshaw's acquittal were the subject of discussion at Alleghany for many a year thereafter.

* The group of scattered cabins in the vicinity of upper Mt. Vernon Ravine and on Galloway's Ridge was known as Shakesville or Mt. Vernon.-Ed.

Notes on the Author--Mr. Wm. Pickiepoche. William Pickiepoche is the pen name of a mining engineer, a New Englander and graduate of Harvard College and California Institute of Technology, who practices his profession in the Mother Land Country. He has been in and out of the Alleghany area for the past 30 years and is well versed in the lore of that region. He is an occasional contributor of historical articles to the "Mountain Messenger", and also edits a local historical quarterly.

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