

# The Sierran

— A Publication of the Sierra County Historical Society —

## The “Flying Paperboy” - The Story of Hal Wright and the Sierra Booster Compiled by Lori Wright with excerpts from the Sierra Booster

**S**ixty years ago, on October 21, 1949, Hal Wright (often called the “Flying Paperboy”) published the inaugural issue of the Sierra Booster. The paper was to be published fortnightly at Loyalton, California, until further notice. Hal passed away at age 96 in June of 2000. The Sierra Booster, however, continues, now published by Hal’s younger daughter, Janice Buck, in the original Sierra Booster office in Loyalton, California.

The story of Hal Wright is a big part of Sierra County history; not only has the Sierra Booster documented the everyday lives of the citizens of Sierra County, the local politics, the geological wonders of the area and economic development, there has been no better promoter of the area than Hal. Hal brought positive exposure of Sierra County and the surrounding area to the international arena. His story has been published in hundreds of periodicals and newspapers in several different countries; radio and television networks have shown his accomplishments throughout the world. Much of this article is written by Hal, himself. It is taken from editorials in early issues of the Sierra Booster, letters he wrote and interviews he

gave to various news media through the years.

Hal was born “Harold Burton Wright” on April 1, 1904, to Harry and Lillian Brandt Wright in Alameda, California. He vaguely remembered camping in a park after the San Francisco Earthquake in 1906 but wished he could remember more because it would have made a “good story.” He spent his younger years in the Bay Area, possibly a year or two in Truckee; his father, Harry was the youngest foreman for the Western Pacific Railroad and worked for a short time in Truckee. Harry fell ill with what Hal would later describe as Lou Gherig’s disease (his illness was never diagnosed.) Harry passed away at age 35 when Hal was 10 years old and Hal and his younger brother, Kenneth, moved with their mother to Paso Robles to be near relatives. At age 16 he competed in lightweight boxing with the San Luis Obispo County Athletic Club. Mountain climbing (without the assistance of mountain climbing equipment; just his basketball



*Hal (on right) with his little brother Kenny, 1911.*

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THE SIERRA COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY



The Sierra County Historical Society is an organization of people interested in preserving and promoting an appreciation of Sierra County's rich history. The Society operates a museum at the Kentucky Mine in Sierra City, holds an annual meeting, publishes a newsletter and conducts historical research. Members are sent notices of Society activities, receive THE SIERRAN, and are admitted free of charge to the museum and stamp mill tour. If you would like to become involved in these activities or would just like to give your support, please join us!

### Officers and Executive Board of The Sierra County Historical Society

**President:** Bud Buczkowske, Alleghany

**Vice President:** Joleen Torri, Sattley

**Secretary:** Vacant

**Treasurer:** Bill Copren, Sattley

Board members in addition to those previously mentioned are Maren Scholberg, Sierraville; Elda Faye Ball, Loyalton; Suzi Schoensee, Sattley; James Connolly, Sierra City; Mary Nourse, Sierra City; Eli Scholberg, Loyalton.

Museum Curator - Virginia Lutes

Assistant - Judy Lawrence

If you have any suggestions or comments, feel free to contact any board member.

### Become a Member!

Membership in the Sierra County Historical Society is open to any interested person, business or organization. Members need not be residents of Sierra County. Dues are due and payable each January for the calendar year.

Membership categories are as follows:

INDIVIDUAL	\$20.00
FAMILY & INSTITUTION	\$25.00
BUSINESS & SUPPORTING	\$35.00
SUSTAINING	\$50.00
LIFE (per individual)	\$300.00

(The board increased membership fees commencing in June of 2008)

Please send dues to: S.C.H.S. Membership Chairperson, PO Box 54, Sattley, CA 96124

### S.C.H.S. Welcomes New Members

- Brian & Mary Davey Family.....Sierra City, CA
- Marvin and Judy Reed ..... Palomino Valley, NV
- Patrick Manning ..... Downieville, CA
- Snowden Manson ..... Mill Valley, CA
- Elda Faye Ball.....Loyalton, CA
- Marion Kofford ..... Arcata, CA
- Sean & Heather Anson ..... Ceres, CA
- Tage & Birte Hansen ..... Corte Madera, CA
- Glenn & Pattie Atkinson..... Reno, NV
- James Allen..... Janesville, CA
- M.L. Dodgson ..... Folsom, CA
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- Brady Family ..... Reno, NV
- Barriou Family..... Grass Valley, CA
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- Harnack Family..... Santa Ana, CA
- Youngblood Family ..... Berkeley, CA

### New Sustaining Members

- Sue & David Michalicek ..... San Jose, CA

### S.C.H.S. Membership Demographics

California.....	231
Nevada.....	20
Virginia.....	3
Washington & Arizona.....	2 ea.
Hawaii, Indiana, Maryland, Missouri, Montana, Oregon, Texas, Utah, and Wisconsin.....	1 ea.

### Demographics

by Sierra County Towns

Alleghany.....	7
Calpine.....	3
Downieville.....	15
Good Years Bar .....	2
Loyalton.....	21
Pike City .....	3
Sattley .....	5
Sierra City.....	21
Sierraville.....	17

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shoes) was his passion and he spent much of his spare time climbing with his cousin, Muirson, in the Mt. Whitney area. Hal graduated from high school in Paso Robles in 1922. From there he attended St. Ignatius College (later named University of San Francisco) on a football scholarship. He also spent one year each at Stanford, Cal Berkeley and Merritt College. He majored in law and engineering but he did not get his degree.

On November 11, 1925, tragedy struck; Hal's younger brother, Kenny was killed in a private test airplane accident in Paso Robles. This ended Hal's college career and he left school to be with his mother in Oakland. While in Oakland, Hal played basketball in the local industrial athletic leagues, which preceded professional sports teams and hosted the nation's best athletes. In the early 1930's, during the great depression, Hal moved to the Northern Mines area to try his hand at hard rock gold mining. In 1931 while working at a French Corral gold mine, a plank broke and dropped him down a vertical shaft injuring his shoulder. While he was recuperating, Hal worked for the Nevada City Nugget, a weekly newspaper, gathering ads and writing news and editorials. This was his only journalistic experience prior to starting the Sierra Booster. After about six months when his shoulder healed he returned to mining and worked in Grass Valley, Nevada City, Alleghany, Forest City, Shenanigan Flat, Brandy City and Morristown, where he remained throughout the '30's. Hal returned to Oakland for a short time before he moved to and settled in Sierra Valley.

Hal stated in a 1988 letter to the editor of the Vermont News Guide, recounting his life's adventures, "I was with Rockwell Manufacturing Company in Oakland during the forties but when I got word from the Eastern headquarters the Oakland plant was to be moved to the East, I recalled the fun I had writing for the Nevada City Nugget and made my way back to Sierra County by starting the Sierra Booster in Loyalton." Hal lived on the Alper's Ranch north of Sierraville on Highway 49 while he was looking for a permanent residence in the area. In April 1950 he purchased the Amos Hathaway home in Loyalton and moved his wife, Allene, and his three children,

Maynard, age 7, Lori, age 5, and Janice, just 11 months old, up to the area he so loved.

Hal's story would not be complete without including "Sweetie Pie's" significant contributions; they were the perfect team. In 1941 they met and married. Hal planned the honeymoon; backpacking for nine days in the mountains at Kearsage Pass west of Owens Valley. Hal told people that he "picked the right



*Hal in a Nevada City grocery store early '30's.*

redhead to marry." Hal was the PR man for the Sierra Booster, travelling throughout the counties of Sierra, Nevada, Plumas and Lassen selling advertising and getting the news; he designed and printed freehand the advertisements in the early issues. It was his job to get the paste up sheets to the printer to print the 4000 or more issues of the paper. The papers were brought back to the Loyalton office, wrapped and hand addressed to be mailed out to the approximately 3500 subscribers. Allene's talents and expertise, however, were invaluable to the business. She did all the typing and prior to computers, that consisted of typing everything twice; the first time

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to establish the justification and the second time to set the justification on her IBM Selectric to make the columns even. On Booster deadline she almost always stayed up all night, lulling the three children to sleep with the click-clacking of the typewriter. Allene was the spelling expert (this was before “spell-check”). She did all the bookkeeping and tended to the office since Hal spent most of his time on the road. Allene often attempted to temper some of Hal’s more controversial editorials by modifying his wording when she typed the copy. Usually, though, he would change it back when he got to the print shop.

In 1953 a business office was added to the home and Hal and Allene lived and worked in this house until they passed away in 2000. Allene’s passing occurred less than six months before Hal’s. Their ashes were dropped from the Sierra Booster airplane onto the area near Staverville, east of Loyalton, one of Hal’s favorite areas with “balancing rocks.”

Hal loved nature and in particular, animals. He never killed for food; he only shot animals with his camera. In a time prior to the establishment of agencies that would take in orphaned wildlife, Hal often brought home to his wife and children a baby wild animal or bird; deer, owls, ring-tailed cat and most well-known, a baby gray fox. He gave Allene a cardboard box with a furry, growling, vicious critter within—and Allene took it upon herself to tame the little creature. She named the baby gray fox, Lightning, and soon Lightning was running around town wearing a leather collar. Lightning always returned home, would whine to come in the house and sleep with one of the children at night. After a few years Lightning was caught and killed (as had been her mother) in a muskrat trap near the Rotary picnic grounds.

Hal named his Sierra Booster editorial page, “The Right Pitch” beginning with the second issue. In the first issue, his editorial was preceded with “Hear ye! Hear ye! Hear ye!” and read as follows: “You are now reading the inaugural issue of California’s newspaper—the SIERRA BOOSTER. This is to be a pictorial newspaper devoted to the best interests of the residents and neighbors of the Sierra County area. We will set forth here no cut and dried policies. We are here to serve those with whom we

come in contact. We welcome your suggestions and constructive criticisms. If you are pleased with the results of our efforts—we will also be pleased.” Hal was adamant about “buying locally” often chastising those who spent their money out of county, especially government officials. In the early ‘60’s Hal began calling Loyalton “Smithneck”, Loyalton’s original name, because some county officials were being what Hal felt was less than loyal by purchasing supplies and equipment out of county. Encouraging folks to buy locally was an ongoing effort of Hal’s throughout his life. In the January 30, 1950 “Right Pitch,” Hal describes how the loss of one business (due to folks taking their business out of county) affects everyone in the County. “It seems to me that before we try to entice more industry into our area, we should work toward the prosperity and settlement of existing industry. Here is an example to show at what I am driving. Early last year a young fellow with a lot of ambition chose Loyalton as a logical location for a shoe repair shop. With the more than a thousand who lived in town and the hundreds more in neighboring communities, all of whom wear out shoes every day, it seemed like a good bet. Especially so, when the vocations and avocations of the residents of the area were taken into consideration. (When lumbermen or cowboy boots or hunter or skier shoes wear out—they take a lot of fixing.) So this enterprising businessman rented a shop in a near downtown location, equipped it with shoe repairing machinery and hung out his shingle. His prices were right in line and I can personally attest that the quality of materials used and his workmanship were right up to snuff. For a couple of months he was busy repairing the shoes of people who were glad to spend their money in town where it might circulate for awhile before leaving. Those shoes repaired, work began to slack off until the man found it necessary to look around for added income. He was employed by a lumber company, but kept his shop open during the evenings and Saturdays, hoping to eventually get enough work coming his way so that he could devote full time to his shoe repairing. Come the end of the year—and the vicious truth finally dawned on him—THE PEOPLE OF SIERRA COUNTY AND SIERRA VALLEY DO

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NOT SUPPORT LOCAL INDUSTRY! Because of this fact, this area is right now losing its only shoe repair business. The proprietor is closing shop and moving his equipment to Oakland. Ed White loses a tenant, Attilio Lombardi will have an empty shop instead of added income. The Golden West Hotel will have one less boarder. There will be one Ford missing from those serviced by Carl Fargo and Lynn and Roy White. The electric company will lose a customer. The local theatre will have an empty seat that may have been filled, and the Sierra Booster loses an advertiser. All other businesses in the area lose a potential customer—and the money they may have made from him (and further circulated with their neighbors) will be no longer available. Those of us who would like to have our shoes repaired near home will now have to send or take them out of the area, wait several days, then go after them or have them sent to us. The lapse of time and the cost will both be greater—and the money that leaves in this way NEVER FINDS ITS WAY BACK."

With his decisive convictions, Hal came to Sierra County with the intention of promoting the area, sharing with the world what he considered to be the most beautiful countryside anywhere. He loved the rugged territory, noting one or more local geological phenomena in nearly every issue of the Sierra Booster. Early issues featured photos by Philip Newberg while Hal built up a photographic library of his own. Starting his own newspaper was the best way he could advance the economic conditions in the area he so loved. Hal not only publicized the beautiful

countryside; he regularly spoke of the goodness of the people who inhabit this area. In the April 17, 1953, "Right Pitch" Hal stated, "A major objective of the Booster is to introduce this country to people who live elsewhere in such a manner that they will want to come here and help us enjoy our wonderful land."

Hal's strong-minded and adventurous spirit became apparent to local citizens as he would soon ski across the Yuba Pass (he had never been on skis before) during the winter of 1952 when snow closed the



*Hal, 1952, in Sierraville on his way over Yuba Pass.*

highway for a couple of weeks. At that time the papers were printed in Sacramento and Hal needed to get the paste-up sheets to the printer in a timely manner—he had a deadline to meet! Many locals told him he couldn't possibly do it and his remains would be found the following spring when the snow melted. Hal's own words describing this adventure are as follows: "There was five feet of snow all over Sierra Valley and several times that in the mountains. I put on a pair of skis for the first time with Booster paste up sheets in a knapsack and started west from our office as Loyaltan was snow bound nine days. I stayed overnight at the

end of the first day at the Frank Turner ranch in Sattley. Tired. It took me until noon the next day to get to the summit of Yuba Pass as I was making tracks up to 18 inches deep and it was snowing hard. At midnight I reached Bassetts Station and got some sleep. Exhausted. On the third day at noon I finally found what skiing could be as I slid along a few hundred feet in tracks made by others in Sierra City. It was pick 'em up and lay 'em down all the way until then. It was easier from there on

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as I went to Sacramento by car, got the Boosters printed and came home via the Feather River Highway. Yuba Pass Hiway was closed 49 days that winter and I crossed over the summit four more times on skis." Hal made it, showing his fortitude and determination, as well as his athleticism; he was 48 years old at the time. The Sierra Booster has always been printed on time; never late in sixty years!

After a few years of driving the winding, mountainous roads in inclement weather, Hal discovered that he could cover more territory in less time by taking to the air in his own plane. In 1953 he had Frank Nervino at Beckwourth Airport teach him to fly and he purchased his first airplane, a 1946 Piper Cub. In 1960 he gave his Piper Cub to his son, Maynard, as a high school graduation present. He replaced the Piper Cub with a 1949 Aeronca Sedan. The Aeronca is now locally owned by Toodie and Bob Marshall of Beckwourth and is still housed in a hanger at Beckwourth Airport. One advantage of flying the plane over driving a car was that he could fly over remote lookouts and ranches and toss a Sierra Booster out of the plane down to those subscribers below; he became very proficient at dropping the paper on (or at least close to) the front porches. He also began taking aerial pictures and published many outstanding photos of the area. Many of his aerial photos have his autograph, the shadow of his plane, on the picture.

One photo, which he waited 20 years to capture, was the "Williams Loop" photo. The picture, taken from the air, captures 116 Western Pacific

train cars, including the engine and caboose, circling the near-mile-long Williams Loop, five miles east of Quincy. The Associated Press asked for it and it was published in newspapers all over the world. This photo is still available for purchase in three different sizes from the Sierra Booster Office in Loyalton.

Hal relates one of his more nerve-racking flying incidents where his ingenuity may have saved his life. In 1954 he was flying with his 12-year old son, Maynard, when he landed on a very short runway a few miles west of the old Cal-Ida Mill; "The landing was OK, but in turning around I clipped a rock pile and broke off a few inches from the wooden prop on one blade. I whittled a couple of hours on the other blade in order to come somewhat close to an even balance. On takeoff from that little-used strip at around 4500 feet elevation, a pilot would suddenly find his plane a half-mile over



*Hal's trademark distribution of the Sierra Booster by plane.*

the terrain. I told 'Nard' to wait for me, and if I didn't get back in an hour, to go to the sawmill. I took off alone and found I could gain altitude slightly, nothing like when the prop was at full length. I staggered back to the strip that was made in an old gold-mining digging and invited Nard to climb aboard. His extra 100 pounds had a slowing effect, but I found we could still gain something if I found a few up-drafts. We had to get up to 7000 feet in order to clear the treetops at Yuba Summit. That we did—barely, and the rest of the trip was easy. For replacement I bought a steel propeller." Maynard still has the whittled-down propeller in his possession.

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Hal joined the Rotary Club in Loyalton in the early ‘50’s and remained a member until his death. He was one of two people who didn’t receive a nickname—He was just “Hal.” The other person was Ed White. Rotary members today don’t know why those two men didn’t get nicknames.

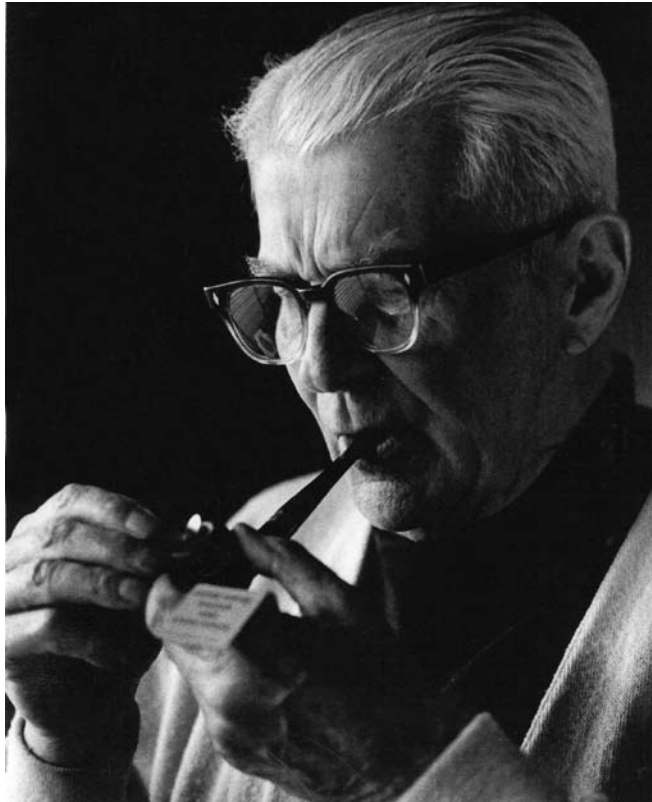
In the 50’s Hal was extremely active in promoting Sierra County at the California State Fair and taking responsibility for decorating the Sierra County exhibit. In 1954, the Sierra Booster won the first place award for the newspaper that best portrayed the theme of “California Magic,” the theme of that year’s state fair.

Politically active with the Republican Central Committee, then-Governor Ronald Reagan appointed Hal to the State Board of Funeral Directors and Embalmers where he served for nine years. Hal sold real estate in the ‘60’s and ‘70’s and twice earned a \$3 million plaque from United Farm Agency; all this while continuing to publish the Sierra Booster. He was Grand Marshall twice for the Tahoe-Truckee Air Show in Truckee. He was the oldest member of the UFO, United Flying Octogenarians, and organization for pilots over the age of 80. At age 91, the Federal Aviation Administration held up his pilot’s license, requiring several medical tests not required in the past; he passed all the tests. Hal claimed “age discrimination” and sued the FAA. The suit was settled out of court and Hal was issued his license for two more years.

Most of the publicity regarding Hal makes mention of his distant relationship to the “Wright Brothers” and that flying was in his genes. It should also be

noted that the newspaper business was also in his genes. His grandfather, Horace G. Wright, started the first newspaper, *The Leader*, in Paso Robles. But how did Hal get the internationally-known nickname of “the Flying Paperboy?” Jan Buck, his younger daughter, says, “When flying, Hal frequently took passengers and in 1975 Hal took along local Baptist pastor, Mark Lambert and the two were flying over State Highway 395 when Hal would

fling papers out as he’d been doing the previous 25 years. A nearby truck driver observed the air drop and figured it a narcotics drop and called law enforcement who met Hal and Pastor Mark at the airport. The Associated Press picked up the story and history was made.” Stories about Hal have been published in hundreds of periodicals and radio and television programs including *The Wall Street Journal*, *National Geographic*, *The National Enquirer*, *The Star*, *Ripley’s Believe it or Not*, *Good Morning America*, *CBS Sunday Morning*, *Herb Caen*, *Paul Harvey* and many others.



*Hal Wright*

Hal and Allene (or Sweetie Pie as Hal affectionately called her) became grandparents in 1962. They began a crusade to create a national holiday for grandparents, the Second Sunday in September (the 3 S’s), and on April 23, 1968, their efforts were rewarded; Senate Rules Resolution No. 40 was adopted creating the second Sunday in September each year as National Grandparents’ Day.

As recently as May 24, 2009, Hal was shown on television in the 1997 segment of *CBS Sunday Morning* as part of the 30 year anniversary celebration of the *Sunday Morning* program.

# The Sierran

Sierra County Historical Society

P.O. Box 260

Sierra City, California 96125



*Suzi Schoensee, in authentic period costume, and Judy Lawrence attended the Plumas-Sierra County Fair on Mining Day representing the Kentucky Mine and Museum. Through informational panels and photos of the mine and mill, they helped fairgoers learn about the hard rock gold mining process and the history of gold mining at the Kentucky Mine. They invited fairgoers to visit the mine and take one of the guided tours that take place at 11 am and 2 pm, Wednesday through Sunday, through the Labor Day weekend.*

## Annual Meeting Notice

**Sunday, September 27th - 12:30 p.m.**

**Milton Gottardi Museum & Park**  
A-24 Beckwith St., Loyalton, California

Bring a sack lunch - beverage and dessert provided

Questions: Contact Elda Ball (530) 993-4373

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## Note to Members

Suzi Schoensee, Membership Chair, is planning to send out questionnaires with the annual dues announcement in order to gain more information about members. This will help us respond to members' interests and concerns.

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## Thank You

We would like to extend a big "Thank You" to Bob Morales for arranging the wonderful line up of groups for our 2009 Music at the Mine concert series.