



# THE ELECTROLIER

Newsletter of the St. Helena Historical Society, Fall 2006, Vol.4 No.3

## Wesley and Eva Jennings

by Kathleen Kernberger

*(Editor's note: The fourth annual "Spirits of St. Helena" Cemetery Walk took place on Nov 4. The event was blessed with beautiful weather, a record crowd and kudos from all who attended. Below is the story of Wesley and Eva Jennings. More "spirits" are on p. 3 and will be featured in future newsletters.)*

One of the reasons that St. Helena is such an interesting place to live is the wide diversity of backgrounds among the people here. Members of long established families cross paths daily with the newly arrived. This was the case in the past as well as today. Wesley Leroy Jennings and his family are good examples of that diversity.

Wesley's grandfather, Paul Canner came to the Napa Valley from Missouri in the late 1850's. A former slave, he had received some money and a team of oxen on gaining his freedom. In the Napa area, this team helped him earn a living working for ranches and tanneries. He and his wife, Julia, first lived on Dry Creek Road, in the Oakville Grade area. Strong supporters of education and schools, they donated property for an elementary school on Oakville Grade Road. The area was too remote for good access to schools and eventually Paul and Julia became concerned about their children's education and "moved into town" to a house on Napa Street. Here, their daughter, Alice, second of their 6 children, was born in 1873. In 1891, Alice married Henry Jennings, a farmer from Woodland. Their son, Wesley, was born in the Canner house in the same bedroom that his mother had been born in a generation earlier.

When Wesley was 6 months old, the family moved to St. Helena, which remained Wesley's home for the rest of his life. Here, his two sisters were born to the growing family. When Wesley was 5, and his two sisters 3 and 4 months, tragedy struck the family. His mother, Alice, died of "consumption," what we know today as tuberculosis. Henry was left, with the help of fellow St. Helenans, to raise his children. Two months later, tragedy struck again,

when the baby girl died at the age of 6 months.

Wesley had fond memories of growing up in St. Helena. He attended school in the crowded wooden elementary school building and, later, the handsome stone one which replaced it. Known in later life for his sense of humor, he recalled the boys bringing snakes to school and turning them loose to scare the girls.

A talented musician, his gift was discovered at the age of 8, when he taught himself to play a flute he had been given. Later, he taught himself how to play the piano. In those days, St. Helena had 3 local bands and Wesley belonged to all of them. In fact, he was a member of the St. Helena Champion Jazz Band for more than 50 years. This gift for music led to his meeting his future wife, Eva. He was playing with a band for a dance at the Tucker Grange Hall. Eva was working for the Schram family. They discovered a common love of dancing, which led to a happy marriage lasting more than 50 years.

World War I took many young men away from their homes in St. Helena and Wesley was one of them, drafted as a private. The town lost more than a few of those young men. Happily, Wesley was one of the ones who made it home safely.

Among his other accomplishments were great mechanical and electrical skills. He built the first radio in St. Helena. During ball games, it was said that all the men were in the Jennings' front yard listening to his radio.

Some of the men couldn't hear the radio, so Wesley built loudspeakers. Working for a private contractor and then the city, he helped maintain the well known electroliers along Main Street.

Eva worked as a nurse, first for the Sanitarium, St. Helena Hospital, and, later, as a home nurse. Like her husband, she had a happy personality. People said that just knowing that she was coming to care for a patient, immediately caused an improvement. In 1975, she was named the Citizen of the Year by the St. Helena Chamber of Commerce.

Wesley died in 1980, mourned not only by his family, but the town as well. Described as "a St. Helena institution," he was said to have been a gentleman, with a fantastic sense of humor. He enriched the lives of all who knew him, and everyone in town did. Eva lived 2 years longer. With her death, the town lost someone who was described as one of the kindest women who had ever lived here.



Young Wesley Jennings

## PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Dear Members,

As you can see from the cover story, we just completed our most successful cemetery tour ever. We were blessed with perfect weather, many attendees and volunteers enjoyed the day. The dinner following at Silverado Brewing Company allowed us to pat ourselves on the back for a job well done. See pictures of the event on our website: [www.shstory.org](http://www.shstory.org).

Just previous to this, on October 21, your society had a successful booth at the St. Helena Hometown Harvest Festival. It was a birthday celebration with this year being the 130<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the incorporation of St. Helena. Thanks to volunteer Marie Bowen, the original articles of incorporation were on display from the pages of the *St. Helena Star* in 1876. People were fascinated by our historic photos, with crowds stopping in at our tables.

The Culinary Institute of America pastry chefs baked and donated three huge chocolate mousse sheet cakes for the occasion. Mayor Del Britton, with assistance from past mayors John Brown and Greta Ericson, cut the cake with flair and pomp. Many said it was the best tasting cake they ever had and I agree! A picture of the event appeared in the November 9 issue of the *St. Helena Star*. The celebration was a joint effort of the society, St. Helena Chamber of Commerce and the St. Helena Recreation Department.

Speaking of the Chamber, two members of our board of directors accompanied the whirlwind tour of China Nov 4-12! Susanne Salvestrin and Skip Lane were very excited about this trip.

**Save the date December 5** for the society's Christmas Party, a joint event with the Napa Valley Wine Library Association. It will be a 6:00pm potluck dinner at the library. We will have an introduction to the wonders of the wine library collections, including videotape interviews, photographs, books, and much more information on the world of wine. Since many of our members do historical research, it is always useful to know of new sources to use.

Our next big event is the **Discover Hidden Treasures Antiques Show on February 18** at the Native Sons Hall. Kathy Kernberger is lining up the dealers and appraisers for this event, which will be a major fundraiser for your society. Know of an antique dealer who might come? Contact Kathy at 963-3117. Donations are needed for the collectibles and antiques silent auction! Please contact me if you have something! We invite you get in on the fun and volunteer on the organizing committee! Just call me at 963-5748.

Lastly, we wish all of you Happy Holidays and a joyous New Year. Your society plans to accomplish more milestones in 2007 on its way to opening the St. Helena History Center!

*Mariam Hansen, President*

### *I'd like to join the St. Helena Historical Society!*

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_ Email \_\_\_\_\_

Individual \$30 Family \$50

Business/Organizaton \$150 Life \$500

*I would like to:* Volunteer \_\_\_\_\_ Make a donation to the Society \_\_\_\_\_

St. Helena Historical Society  
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#### Officers and Directors

Mariam Hansen, President  
Susanne Salvestrin, Vice President  
Gwen Becker, Secretary  
Kim Farmer, Treasurer  
Frank Harrison  
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Skip Lane  
Roberta Oswald  
John Sales  
Tricia Westbrook

#### Committee Notes:

The *Collections Committee* coordinates and manages the acquisition of new materials. It meets the last Monday of the month at 9:30am in the library upstairs meeting room. Current chair of the committee is Frank Harrison. You can email him at [jackielfrank@aol.com](mailto:jackielfrank@aol.com)

The *Events Committee* plans and presents events to teach the public about our local history. Coming up is the Discover Hidden Treasures event at the Native Sons Hall on February 18, 2007. Call Mariam Hansen, 963-5748 for more information.

Questions? Comments?

Call or email the Newsletter editor,  
Kim Farmer, at 963-0630,  
[ksfarmer@seedgrain.com](mailto:ksfarmer@seedgrain.com)



## HISTORICAL SOCIETY ACTIVITY BRIEFS

### *Spirits of St. Helena Cemetery Tour*

Interesting people from 150 years of St. Helena Cemetery's history were honored at their grave sites during the annual Spirits of St. Helena Tour. In addition to Wesley Jennings, whose story appears on the front page, seven others were portrayed.

Frank Harrison told of his grandfather Wilbur Harrison, who built many buildings on Main Street and homes throughout the town. He did the carpentry work on the St. Helena Star Building in 1900.



Mariam Hansen portrays Laurel Fay Gandil

Marvin Collins was Judge Serranus Hastings, first chief justice of the California Supreme Court, founder of Hastings Law School and a major grapegrower in his day.

Gwen Becker told of John Loughborough, who was the first Seventh Day Adventist preacher in California. During his life he helped spread the Adventist faith as an author, by preaching, and by founding many sanitariums, colleges, hospitals, and publishing houses.

Mariam Hansen portrayed Laurel Fay Gandil. Her husband Chick Gandil was the ringleader in the 1919 fix of the World Series. Gamblers conspired with him and the Chicago White Sox to lose the series to the Cincinnati Reds. Gandil pocketed \$35,000 from the scheme, became a plumber and died in Calistoga in 1970.

Betty Studebaker portrayed Tish Hewitt wife of William Alexander Hewitt, a well-known grapegrower, descendant of Jean Adolphe Brun of Brun & Chaix Winery, and president of John Deere Tractor. He is buried in the Brun family plot (having been very proud of his French roots) after a distinguished career at John Deere and as US Ambassador to Jamaica.

Pat Chiles Schlages described her ancestor Joseph Ballinger Chiles and brought original portraits of him and his wife, along with other artifacts to share. Chiles was one of the first settlers in Napa Valley and a valley is named after him. He blazed many trails for the pioneers who crossed the plains to California.

Connie Kay portrayed Sophie Mitchell, wife of Presbyterian Minister James Mitchell and a renowned botanical watercolorist. Sophie came from Sweden with her step-



Connie Kay as Sophie Mitchell

father Sven Alstrom, who owned White Sulphur Springs and built the St. Helena Hotel. Connie is a real life watercolorist and painted during the tour.

Our thanks to St. Helena High Video Production class student Alec Wittscheibe who filmed the re-enactors for posterity.



*At the St. Helena Hometown Harvest Festival, Mayor Del Britton and former mayors Greta Ericson and John Brown prepare to cut the cake and celebrate St. Helena's 130th birthday.*

## CALENDAR

Call our voicemail at St. Helena Library to reserve a space: 707-963-5244 x 187. See our website: [www.shstory.org](http://www.shstory.org)

### November

**Nov 27:** Collections Committee Meeting, 9:30 am, Library Community Room.

### December

**Dec 5:** Christmas Party with the NVWLA at St. Helena Library, 6:00pm. Potluck Dinner. Please bring sides and salads. (see below) Reservations required.

**Dec 25:** Collections Committee cancelled

### January

**Jan 9:** Photo Preservation workshop, 4-6 pm, St. Helena Firehouse meeting room. Reservations required.

**Jan 29:** Collections Committee Meeting, 9:30 am, Library Community room

### February

**Feb 18:** Discover Hidden Treasures Antique Show, Native Sons Hall, 1313 Spring Street, 10am to 4pm. Bring your treasures to be appraised or buy new ones. Antiques and collectibles silent auction.

**Feb 20:** Board Meeting, 4:00pm, Library Community Room

**Feb 26:** Collections Committee Meeting, 9:30 am, Library Community Room.

### March

**Mar 6:** TBA

**Mar 26:** Collections Committee Meeting, 9:30 am, Library Community Room.

### *Mission Statement*

**The St. Helena Historical Society is a public educational organization. Its mission is to collect, preserve, exhibit, and provide access to historical materials of all kinds from our community as well as to promote public awareness and participation in the collection of such materials.**

## JOIN US FOR CHRISTMAS CHEER!

Party at the  
St. Helena Library  
6:00pm  
December 5, 2006

The Napa Valley Wine Library Association will be joining us to celebrate the Season. Program will be an overview of the Wine Library collection. NVWLA will provide wines and meat. Our members are to bring salad and sides to serve 10. To make a reservation, call SHHS voicemail, 963-5244 x 187 and leave a message.

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