

History is guarded by descendants of pioneers ...George Wilkes Peabody exemplifies that breed

By Mary M. Otis



George Wilkes Peabody
(Photo by Cesar Caballero)

Carrying the torch for guarding the history of their forebears is exemplified by George Wilkes Peabody who is living his retirement years in El Dorado County.

Did someone say retirement? Yes, after 36 years of working for Lockheed Aircraft Company, Burbank, where he started as a form block maker after getting an AA degree in mechanical technology. He ended his career as an industrial engineer and patent holder. (Lockheed had sent him to Antioch College in Ohio for special training in foundry practices.) This retirement led to a new career as amateur historian.

George's heritage is deeply entwined in California history. He is a great-grandson of Gold Rush and territorial pioneer Albert Gallatin Wilkes who made a fortune as a miner, baker and butcher in the Placerville/Georgetown vicinities of El Dorado County. He is also the grandson of California pioneer Henry Adams Peabody, a newspaperman, Confederate soldier and early foreman of the California State Printing Office in Sacramento.

George Wilkes Peabody was born to George Tompkins Peabody (author of the article titled "William Walker — Filibuster in the 1850s," see page 26) and Jane Blanche Wilkes on October 23, 1918, on an early almond and prune ranch in Paso Robles, San Luis Obispo County.

Raised in Los Angeles County during the Great Depression, which devastated the family finances, he was sent in 1933 as a roustabout to a 50,000-acre cattle ranch — the Spanish Grant Jesus Maria Rancho — along the Pacific Coast near Santa Maria where he was worked hard and fed well.

In 1944, George was drafted into wartime service. His mother was on the Draft Board — this had no mitigating effect on the law. He joined the U.S. Marine Corps to keep out of the cold of Europe and the hope of finding his dad and uncle who were captured by the Japanese in the Philippines.

After being wounded in the Battle of Iwo Jima, George was wrapped up in a plaster cast, issued a Purple Heart medal and sent home without seeing his father or uncle. He later learned that his father (George Tompkins Peabody) had been beheaded in samurai tradition for his leadership in the resistance movement against the Japanese. His uncle Henry Sterling Peabody died of starvation in the infamous Santo Tomas Japanese concentration camp.

Settled in Hanks Exchange in El Dorado County in 1974, George was appointed to an ad hoc committee to work with the County Planning Department to develop a land use plan for Pleasant Valley, Oak Hill, Sly Park and Newton areas. He wrote the historical perspective for the area plan which was adopted by the County Board of Supervisors on July 20, 1978.

Bitten by the local history bug, George read the Placerville *Mountain Democrat* microfilm files of 1854 to 1911 and scanned the rest to date. He read every historical reference that had anything to do with his locality. He interviewed pioneer family descendants, hounded reference libraries, employees of the County Recorder's office, visited cemeteries, reviewed the archives of the El Dorado County Historical Museum, the El Dorado Irrigation District, archives of the Eldorado National Forest, searched the U.C. Berkeley Bancroft Library and the California State Library.

During his research, he gathered stories of the Placerville Olympic Club of the 1880s in support of the Centennial celebration of the 1988 Placerville summer Olympics. He unearthed sources reporting the 1903 "Battle of Manzanita Hill," the fight between escaped Folsom prisoners and Company H, 2nd Regiment, California National Guard.

He located an original booklet, *The Conspirators Victims, or the Life and Adventures of J.V. Craine who was Hung at Coloma, Cala., October 26, 1855*, written by Craine while in prison, published in Sacramento, 1855. George presented a reproduction of the book to the El Dorado County Historical Museum.

With much historical data at hand, George and his wife, Patricia, a photographer, prepared four photo-ready, book size, local history manuscripts authorized for publication by the El Dorado County Community Development Department for its use. In addition, George and Patricia printed up hundreds of copies for the County Historical Museum to sell, with all proceeds going to the museum's memorial fund.

At the invitation of the Gold Oak Union School, George assisted teachers of mentally gifted minors by providing experiences in history research and writing, field studies of historical and pre-history sites and gold panning. He wrote historical stories from 1977 through 1985 that were published in the Gold Oak School *Gazette* and sent home to the children's families.

An associate member of the Conference of California Historical Societies, George also maintains membership in veterans groups including the Sons of the American Revolution and numerous history and genealogy societies.

When the sixth largest canyon live oak in the United States located near Placerville fell during a storm, George led the Mother Lode Historical Study Group in Diamond Springs in preserving a section of the trunk now at the county museum. To accompany the section, George wrote *The Life Span of the Big Oak of Hanks Exchange and the History of North America, the United States and California during its Lifetime, 1579-1982*.

George and Patricia conduct youth groups on nature walks identifying aquatic and riparian wildlife, flowers, edible and medicinal plants, Indian methods of using plants in medicine, visit bedrock mortar sites and night-time astronomy sessions. George assisted the El Dorado Indian Council researching Indians of the Mother Lode before western culture came.

He was a leader in celebrations of the Bicentennial of the U.S. Constitution and the Declaration of Independence.

He helped finance the "Rock Across America" project which provided Placerville's 10,000-pound mariposite boulder sent in the name of the State of California for the

Great bronze doors of U.S. Capitol feature bust of Peabody and gold finder James Marshall

A research project of George Wilkes Peabody at the National level relates to the great bronze doors of the western entrance to the U.S. Capitol.

Some years ago, George's granddaughter went on a trip to Washington, DC. She learned that among the bas reliefs and statuettes on the imposing doors was a bust of a man named George Peabody.

Naturally, her grandfather immediately sprang into full research mode. The chief architect of the Capitol informed him that the bust is of George Peabody, a philanthropist of the 1800s. He is known for his many contributions to U.S. education...among these: the Peabody Museum of Natural History and Sciences at Yale University; the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard; the Peabody Institute which funds a conservatory of music, art gallery and free library in Boston; and a fund that established the College for Teachers in Nashville, Tennessee.

There's more. James Marshall, discoverer of gold at Coloma which started the Gold Rush and the greatest migration in history, is represented on the doors. A statuette of Marshall is located next to a panel depicting mining.

Quoting our George: "People claim that Marshall was an inconsequential figure in history but the fact that his likeness shares the great bronze doors on our National Capitol with those of Benjamin Franklin, James Madison, Thomas Jefferson and Daniel Webster proves otherwise."

"Foundation of Freedom — Constitution" monument in Philadelphia in 1987.

The list of accomplishments, ranging from local to national, which George has achieved, are mind boggling and too numerous to list here. In the year 2010, he will be 92 and is still going strong — working on our state's and nation's history. We SALUTE you!

Circle August 25, 2010 on your calendars — workshop in Martinez

A mission of the Conference of California Historical Societies has always been to provide information to its members that will help them do their work better. This goal is primarily accomplished through the *California Historian* and our annual meetings and symposia.

During our spring symposium last March, Ben Wirick, our energetic administrator, talked with a few of us about

conducting yearly workshops in several locations throughout the state as a way of increasing our value to members and the public. We all agreed that this idea was worth exploring.

As a result of Ben's ideas, the first all-day workshop in our new annual series will be on Wednesday, August 25, 2010 in Martinez, California.

The subject will be Volunteers — how to recruit, train, retain and fire if necessary. Speakers are experts on the subject.

The workshop is co-sponsored by the Martinez Historical Society. Watch for detailed information and registration forms in the mail.

Contact persons are Andrea Blachman at 925-372-7146 and Mary-ellen Jones at 925-254-2295.