



50 Years



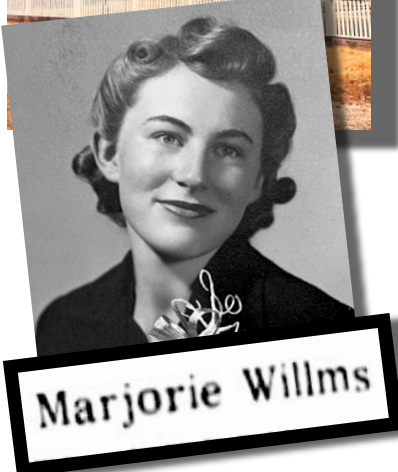
# A Knights Ferry Tale

# Newsletter January 2023

The McHenry Museum & Historical Society (MM&HS) has a mission to promote the history of Stanislaus County. One of our most historically celebrated communities is that of Knights Ferry. Willms Ranch is one of the most historic and iconic locations in this community. The Willms Family began a restoration of the historic home in 2008. It was the dream of the late Marjorie Desmond Willms, along with publishing the history of the family, and the ranch.



**Knights Ferry**  
By Marjorie Willms



In 2022, what Marjorie began became a reality as *Willms Ranch: A Family Saga* by Robert Willms Righter hit the presses. The book includes a special dedication "For Marjorie Desmond Willms, whose love of the Willms Ranch history was the inspiration for this book." We sat down with Marjorie's daughter, Shirley Willms McPhee, to tell her mother's story. The story of a woman who not only dedicated much of her life to the preservation of the ranch; she was also the steward of the news and the history in her community.

Marjorie Desmond entered this world January 27, 1921, in Taber, Alberta, Canada. She was the second child born to Jack (1886-1965) and Mabel (1901-1979) Desmond. Weighing in at a mere four pounds, it was said Marjorie was small enough to fit in a shoe box, as we learn when she grew, she became an unstoppable life force. In 1923, her family visited an aunt in Modesto and decided to stay. The Desmond Family settled in Hickman until they moved to Knights Ferry in 1928 and raised turkeys. Marjorie attended Knights Ferry Grammar School and later Oakdale High School, graduating in 1939. She worked on the school's yearbook, *The Oracle*, and thus began her passion for writing and reporting which she would nourish for decades to come.

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## Mr. & Mrs. Raymond Willms



In August 1938, Marjorie received a letter from the Newspaper Institute of America in New York stating she had a favorable report after submitting a Writing Ability Test. They said she showed an unusual promise for one so young and with proper training "should carry you to success as a writer for publication". Marjorie was also a member of the California Scholarship Federation and wrote and directed a play. Just before graduation she met her future husband, Arthur Raymond "Ray" Willms (1913-1994) and they were married November 21, 1941, in Sparks, Nevada.

Raymond and Marjorie began their family, which would grow to five children: Shirley Willms McPhee, Barbara Willms Barbagelata, Gary Willms, John Willms (1951-2017), and Carolyn Willms Lopez. They lived their family life at Willms Ranch, which was established in 1852 prior to Stanislaus County being formed out of Tuolumne County. Their brand (KW) was the first brand issued in Tuolumne County. If it was not enough to help run a ranch and raise five children, Marjorie entered yet another profession which would be her longest contribution to Knights Ferry.

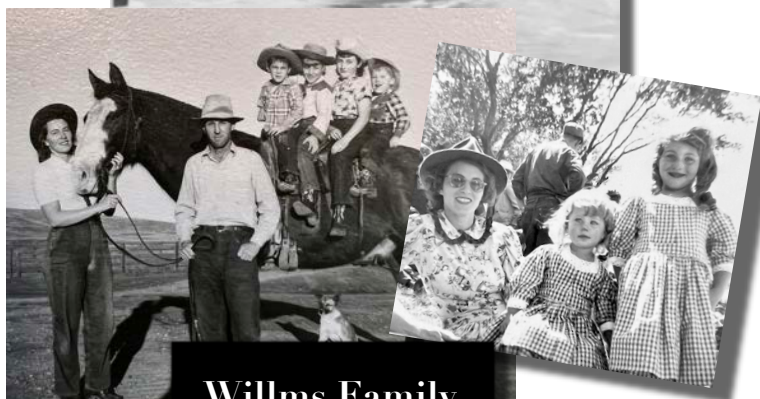


**Willms Family**

In 1948, Knights Ferry celebrated its one-hundred-year celebration and Ray and Marjorie were two of many who were instrumental in the planning of the festivities. It was with the centennial, Marjorie began to write about the history of the community. Suddenly, she was recruited by *the Stockton Record*, followed by *the Modesto Bee* and then *the Oakdale Leader*. What was her job? She was to report on all the news, minus traffic accidents, which occurred in Knights Ferry. Her children wonder to this day if their mother ever slept. Marjorie worked on the ranch, took care of the children, was a member of the Knights Ferry Mother's Club, a Scout Leader, was a member of both the grammar school and High School PTA and later President. With all of that to do, if there was a call for a newsworthy event, Marjorie Willms was on the scene. She would pile the children in her car and head to the story, one of her most dangerous coverages was the 1955 flood. Ray recorded the weather for Knights Ferry for years and the Willms Ranch was a National Weather Station and he reported the weather to a Sacramento television station. Marjorie's dedication to her craft knew no bounds this included setting up a dark room in the closet of her daughter's bedroom to develop all photographs to run with her story. She never stopped!



**1955 Flood**



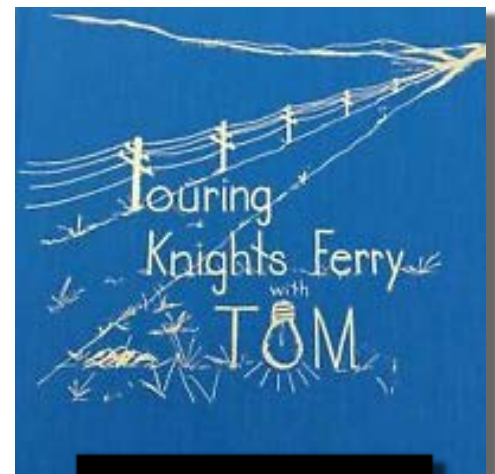
**Willms Family**





On top of all her reporting, Marjorie and Ray were still very civically minded. Preserving local history was a top-priority. They, along with five other couples, were founding members of the Knights Ferry History and Museum Society, and one group project included the restoration of the Napier Home which was one of the oldest homes in the area. Marjorie was one of the founders of the Oakdale Cowboy Museum and served on the board of the Stanislaus County Historical Society and later the MM&HS. She was also a charter member of the Oakdale Museum Society in 1983. Adding to that she helped with the Gladys L. Lemmons Senior Community Center in Oakdale. Age never slowed Marjorie down, following the death of her husband Ray in 1994, she continued to record the weather for the area.

One of Marjorie's greatest accomplishments was her book, *Touring Knights Ferry with Tom* in 1976, she printed 1,000 and sold them all. To continue to list the accomplishments and the activities of Marjorie Desmond Willms could be exhausting. Her family continues to marvel at how her mother got so much work done. Marjorie Desmond Willms passed away on January 28, 2004, a day after her eighty-third birthday. Now, her legacy continues with the preservation of Knights Ferry and Family history. Want to know more on the family on the history of her beloved ranch? You might want to purchase the book which was inspired by this truly remarkable woman (Available for purchase in the McHenry Museum Store).



**Marjorie's Book**



**Photo Album**



**Article by  
David Seymour**



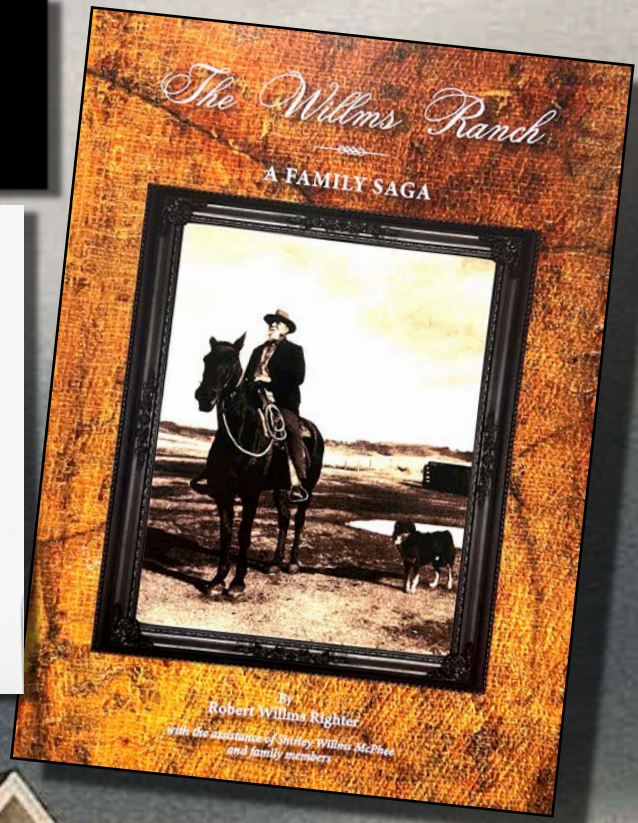
# 170 Years of History



100 Year Club



*Willms Ranch*



Raymond  
&  
Marjorie



Willms Family  
1977, 125 years



# UPDATES

## Craft Faire



## Soup Supper



- On December 3, 2022, The MM&HS successfully hosted "The Children's Holiday Craft Faire," With over one hundred in attendance, children, colored, painted, and enjoyed story-time. We would like to thank all our volunteers for all the hard work.
- On December 11, 2022, The MM&HS hosted our annual "Holiday Soup Supper" for our membership. Due to the pandemic, this event had not been held since 2019, we feel so fortunate to have had sixty-six guests in attendance, and we would like to thank Melynda Rodriguez for her musical stylings.
- The McHenry Museum Christmas Tree will remain on display until the middle of January, so you still have a few weeks to view this gorgeous tree.
- The next board meeting of the MM&HS will take place on January 24, 2022.

## It Happened When...

### 50 Years Ago



- Front page news on January 2, 1923, was the announcement of the death of one of Stanislaus County's most prominent pioneers and dairymen, Valentine B. Dale of Salida, who passed away at age eighty-six on December 31, 1922. What is Mr. Dale's legacy to local history? Dale Road, a major throughfare, is named in his honor.

### 10 Years Ago

•• TUESDAY, JANUARY 1, 2013 B-3\*

## New Year's parties were grand affairs

Considering Matilda McHenry's somewhat reserved, unassuming demeanor, her volunteer role as a New Year's Day hostess for four consecutive years must have seemed surprising. Perhaps even more unexpected was her husband's active participation in these events.



**COLLEEN STANLEY BARE**  
COMMUNITY

- On January 1, 1973, it was announced in *The Modesto Bee* that the university in Turlock which had recently had its name changed to California State College, Stanislaus would most like undergo a name change once again to California State University, Stanislaus. One wonders this projection came to fruition.
- On January 1, 2013, late historian Colleen Stanley Bare (1925-2018) wrote her column for *The Modesto Bee* on the New Year's Eve parties the McHenry Family threw over the years, once again reminding us of yet another story of Modesto's most celebrated family.

## PROMINENT OLD SETTLER DIES AT SALIDA

(Special to The News.)  
SALIDA, Jan. 2.—Valentine Burnett Dale, one of the old and highly respected settlers of Stanislaus county, died Sunday afternoon at his home in Salida. He was 86 years of age.

Mr. Dale, a native of Carrolton, Ga., fought in the confederate army, losing an arm in the service.

In 1858 he married Miss Susan Henon. They came to California in 1869. His wife and son, John, died in 1921.

He is survived by seven children, W. C. Dale, Modesto; Mrs. Cordelia Elmore, Modesto; Milton Dale, Porterville; Mrs. Emma Dockery, Sanger; Mrs. Susie Hayward, Fresno; Mrs. Nina Graham, Salida, and Floyd C. Dale, Salida.

For 62 years he lived on the Dale ranch near Salida. Three years ago he bought a home here and moved into town. He was one of the county's most prominent dairymen.

The funeral service was held this afternoon. Interment was in Citizens cemetery here. The Rev. H. M. Bruce, pastor of the Centenary Methodist Church, and the Rev. Z. J. Needham took charge of the burial service.

## 100 Years Ago

TUESDAY, JANUARY 2, 1923

