

Butte County lore runs deep in the Horning family ...



Frontier flashback

By Robert Eckhart • Photography by Aaron Burg

The Horning family has lived 120 years in Butte County and brothers Wendell, Merritt and Melvin Horning will tell you that it's been anything but dull.

Merritt Horning, for instance, could tell you the tale of the summer he and brother Fulton (now deceased) spent out on Butte Creek, digging for a fortune in gold that their uncles had left there years before — only to have their claim jumped by a shifty local con man.

Then there's the time that their father couldn't work all winter because he was laid low by food poisoning from Thanksgiving. During that cash-strapped season, the Horning family ate chicken-food porridge to get by.

"We cooked the chicken food," said Wendell Horning, who was 8 years old at the time. "It

was just grain — you boil it in water like you would beans. It's not as bad as you would think. You have to chew it a little bit, but it's not bad."

Back in the Butte County of the early 20th century, indoor plumbing was a luxury the Horning family didn't have, and the trip from their canyon ranch to Chico took three hours by wagon.

Merritt Horning, a former Chico doctor and one of the founders of Paradise's Feather River Hospital, has written several historical accounts of the Horning family for local publications like the Paradise Historical Society's "Tales of the Ridge" and the Butte County Historical Society's "Diggin's."

All three brothers recently made a presentation to members of the Paradise Historical Society. Perched around a make-believe campfire, sporting the work-shirts and denim bib pants that were standard issue for kids of their day, the Hornings told stories about what it was like to be raised in Butte Creek Canyon during the 1920s and 1930s.



They had no choice but to mark the spot and cut the bucket loose into Butte Creek. Yet, for some reason, the Brown brothers never went back to dig up the old bucket.

"They'd told the story for so long that I think they got so they didn't believe it themselves," speculated Merritt Horning.

Enter the Horning brothers, aged 15 and 17, and ready to hunt some buried treasure.

"Our minds were off in orbit, envisioning a new pair of not-hand-me-down bib pants that cost 75 cents; a really new blue denim shirt for 35 cents, one that had never been worn by anyone!" wrote Merritt Horning. "We could buy our family a new Ford with two seats and a top."

It took more than 2 years of persuasion, but they finally got their uncles to take them to the spot where they thought the gold might be.

As far as they knew, the gold sat on the property of Ira McCoy, a man from Los Angeles who occasionally hired Merritt Horning to do odd jobs for him. McCoy — who didn't believe the teenager's story of buried treasure — gave them the go-ahead, and the Horning brothers set out to dig up the treasure in June, 1929.

The two camped out that entire summer, digging for the bucket by day and hitting up the neighbors for dinner by night.

The pair became a point of local speculation and eventually wore out their invitations to dinner; but still no gold, despite their discovery of

two huge wrenches that their uncles had dropped in the drink when they had been trying to pry the bucket off the dredge — sure indication that they were getting close.

"Labor Day weekend came and still no gold bucket," Merritt Horning wrote. "Our images of new clothes, a new car and a bathtub got dimmer by the hour."

The boys eventually gave up, thanked Mr. McCoy for letting them dig, and headed back to school.

About two months later, they got a call from a teller at a local bank who had been a family friend for years. He told them that Ira McCoy had just brought in \$6,300 in gold — which he had found with the help of large, German magnets.

"Shivers ran down my spine," Merritt Horning wrote. "It couldn't be true! Within minutes, Fulton and I were in the old Model T on the way to the Butte Creek diggings. There it was, 50 feet to the east of our hole. The bucket was at the bottom of the almost vertical hole, and empty!"

And as if jumping the boys' claim wasn't enough for him, Ira McCoy's ill-gotten gain helped him to hit up investors for \$175,000 to build a gold dredger in the same spot. But after operating the dredge for one day, he skedaddled

The tale of the twice-lost gold stash

At a family reunion in the late 1920s — when Merritt Horning was about 15 years old — he and his older brother Fulton heard the tale of a lost fortune in gold from their uncles, Jim and Kye Brown.

Around 1900, the Brown brothers worked for a mining company on Butte Creek, where they manned a gold dredge. One of their duties was emptying an 8-foot bucket that caught some of the spillage from the dredge — a task that netted about \$2,000 in gold per year.

But somebody let the spillings build up for a period of three years and the bucket got so heavy that it grounded the entire gold dredge.

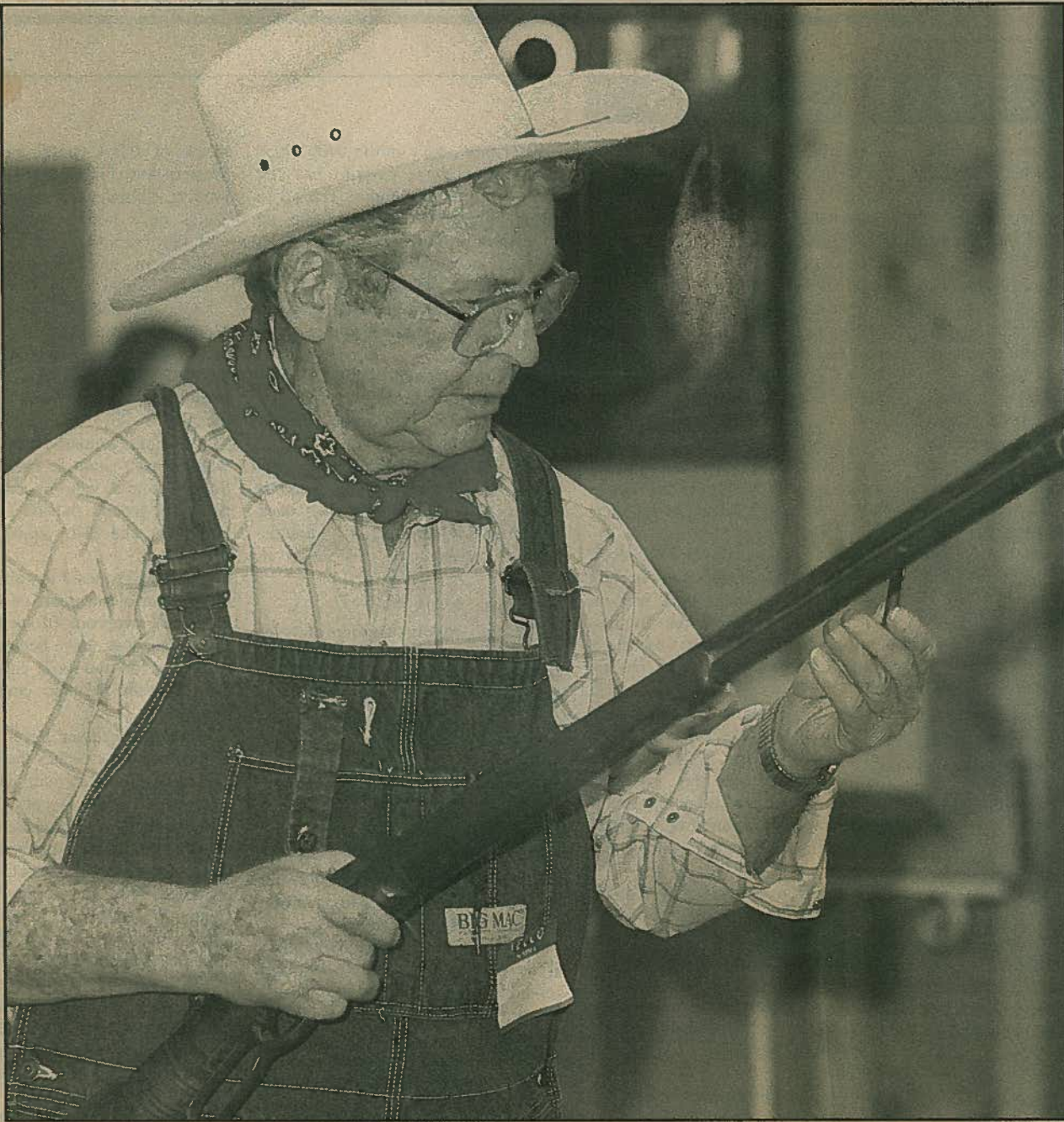
The Brown brothers knew that about \$6,000 in gold was probably in the bucket, but their hard-drinking foreman decided it wouldn't be worth the time to empty the box.



PHOTOS COURTESY THE HORNING FAMILY

Frank and Jessie Mae Horning on their wedding day. The couple's seven children included Feather River Hospital founder Dr. Merritt Horning.

See TALES, page B-4



AARON BURG/THE POST

Wendell Horning holds his father's hunting rifle. 'Father used to go hunting with it and he'd put a forked stick out,' Wendell Horning recalled,

'then just lean the gun on it because he was too little to hold the barrel up.'

TALES:

From page B-1

with the investors' money, according to Horning, never to be seen in Butte Creek Canyon again.

But the Horning brothers are still hoping to get back to that spot and dig up the bucket to put in a local museum.

Frontier justice hits Nimshew Road

"They took the law into their own hands sometimes," Wendell Horning said of early Butte Canyon residents.

"There was a fellow on upper Butte Creek — just above Fox's bar — that lived up there and there were some Chinamen mining down below him.

"Every time he'd be out riding or on the porch and he'd look down there and see a Chinamen, why he'd pop a bullet off at a rock a little ways from him.

"But pretty soon, the Chinamen got tired of that so they followed him up to Nimshew one day and when he was coming back they jumped out from behind a tree and hit him in the head with a great big ol' meat cleaver.

"Well, it split his personality, anyway."

Frank Horning's modest proposal

Young Frank Horning — father of the Horning brothers — had a problem that most 19- or 20-year-olds would love to have: He courted local bachelorettes Sally Blue and Jessie Mae Brown at the same time.

"My dad said he was having a hard time deciding who he liked best," said Melvin Horning, "and he was courting the both of them there for a year or two and some said he was going out nine nights of the week."

That came to an end one 4th of July at the Diamondville (Centerville) School in Butte Creek Canyon.

A group of Frank's buddies got up on a platform, calling the group to order.

Brown for good..

"They said, 'We're going to keep you on this platform until you tell us which color you like best,'" Melvin Horning said, "Blue, or Brown?"

"My mother sat back there on her toes. She didn't know what to do — or whether Frank would say the right color."

When Frank Horning balked, the group of youths forced the issue.

"They said, 'We're not going to let you off here until you tell us, even if we have to give you a good thrashing.'

"Finally, he gave the right answer."

The answer was Brown.

"That made everybody happy," Melvin Horning said. "They jumped up and down — and some of the girls, I guess they considered that a proposal because they wanted to be Jessie's bridesmaids."

The couple was married in November 1903 and had seven children.

"They never had too much," Melvin Horning concluded. "But they gave us a good life."

Epilogue

Last fall, the Horning brothers bought back the 20-acre family farm on Butte Creek — where they spent their early childhoods before their parents sold out and moved to Chico in 1920.

And when the Hornings sold the farm to the McEnespy family, they did just that. According to a document the Horning brothers still have, the contents of the farm went for \$10 and included seven dairy cows, nine calves, a heifer, about two dozen various pigs and shoats, a plow and two wagons.

"That's our family place," said Merritt Horning. "The McEnespy heirs decided to sell it and they gave us the first opportunity to buy it."

In this era of spring-up subdivisions and families that move four and five times before their children are grown, most folks don't understand what the family homestead means to them.

That was the land that the Horning boys picked fruit on, the land where young Merritt learned how to hand-sow oats at age 5, and where he was trampled by horses but miraculously escaped unharmed.



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At left (L-R), surviving brothers Merritt, Wendell and Melvin Horning tell their stories to the Paradise Historical Society. Below (L-R), brothers Merritt, Fulton and Frank Horning feed some of the flock on their Butte Canyon Ranch — the contents of which were sold in 1920 for a sum of \$10.

