

Annie L. Morrison and John H Haydon, 1917, *History of San Luis Obispo County and environs, California, with biographical sketches of the leading men and women of the county and environs who have been identified with the growth and development of the section from the early days to the present* (Los Angeles: Historic Record Company), pp. 507-509

HENRY SANFORD WILLSON.—Prominent among those whose longevity attests to the wonderful climatic advantages of Creston, and equally eminent among those whose own personal recollections reach back into the earliest annals of the region, Henry Sanford Willson is a native son. So long identified with San Luis Obispo County that he is the oldest settler in the Highlands, and the second oldest in the vicinity of Creston. He was born in San Juan, Monterey county, July 16, 1855, the son of Dan Willson, a bricklayer and a member of an old Yankee family, who first saw the light on January 22, 1827. His father worked at his trade in New England until, impelled by the gold fever of 1849, he came to the Pacific Coast. With his brother, Dorson, he went to Boston and joined a company of fifty-four adventurers, who purchased the sailing vessel "Emma Isadora," under Captain McHenry, and sailed her around Cape Horn. Quite one hundred sixty-four days out. The party arrived at San Francisco, September 12, 1849. Continuing on to Stockton, they sold the vessel, divided the proceeds, and dissolved the company after which each went his way into the mines, to seek for gold and fortune. One of this party was James Mitchell, a Scotchman, who in later years located a Homestead in Highlands, San Luis Obispo County, adjoining the place now held by our subject, and resided here until he died.

When "grub" was twenty-five cents a pound, Dan and Dorson Willson walked a hundred fifty miles to the Mariposa mines. The brothers afterward came over to Gilroy, where they had a store, and cut the first hay in that vicinity. They traded over a wide region, doing business with the Spanish families in the Soap Lake country; and it was there that Dan Willson met Miss Becente Sanchez who, in 1854, became his wife. She was born on the Sanchez ranch between Sargent Station and San Juan, a daughter of Don Jose Maria Sanchez, a native of Mexico, who owned a ranch of several leagues and was a large stockman, raising a large number of cattle and horses. Having a great quantity of tallow and other cattle products, he manufactured much soap : and from the industry thus created arose the name of the lake. Death overtook him in a tragic way, for he was accidentally drowned one night while crossing the Pajaro river, and his body was never found. The property was divided between Don Jose's four children. Becente received a large share; and she and her husband moved onto the ranches. Some of the land lay at San Juan, and some of it within the city limits. Dan Willson served twenty years as a trustee of the San Juan school district. In his last illness, he went to Hollister; and there, in 1906, at the age of seventy-eight, he died, and was buried with full Masonic honors.

Besides Henry S. Willson, four children were the issue of this union: George S, deceased; Emma, now Mrs. McElwee, of San Luis Obispo; Elbridge D., of San Jose; and Alma S., who is in Hollister. Henry was brought up at San Juan and Gilroy, where he attended the public schools and worked on a farm. In 1875, he came to Carissa Plains, San Luis Obispo County, and engaged in sheep-raising, partly with his father, and was among the first to graze sheep in that section. In the dry year of 1877, he drove a flock of fifteen hundred sheep to Watsonville, and the following year brought what was left of them to Palo Prieto.

In September, 1878, he came to Highlands with his father's old friend, James Mitchell, and engaged with him in the cattle business on Mitchell's homestead. In 1879 he took a flock of sheep to Los Alamos, Santa Barbara county, and in the fall brought them back here, maintaining them until he sold out in order to engage again in the cattle business. At the end of five years, he dissolved partnership with Mitchell, but continued to raise stock.

By July, 1881, he had located his homestead and hauled the lumber from San Luis Obispo with which to build the necessary house and barns. He then began to raise hay and fodder, and about that time established his brand a W with an S at the top, lying flat. He is still in the sheep and cattle business, making a specialty of the Durham strain, and also raises thoroughbred horses. He is also engaged in the raising of grain. He has bought considerable land, at different times, adjoining his own, commencing with a three-hundred-twenty-acre purchase. He now possesses twelve hundred or more acres all in one body on Indian creek. The Willson ranch is well watered by numerous springs and creeks, and lies ten miles east of Creston.

When Henry Willson first came here, he was made a trustee of the ?-?-? school district, and helped build there the first schoolhouse of ??'s and shakes. Later, he helped organize the Highland school district, and was a trustee for many years, and for some time clerk, a position he still holds. He is also serving as roadmaster of his district.

On January 7, 1877, at Soledad, Henry Sanford Willson was married to Miss Sarah Shepherd. She was born in what is now Hollister (then in Monterey county), and was a daughter of Dr. William N. Shepherd, a native of the vicinity of Bowling Green, Ky. Her grandfather, a farmer, was a Virginian, who settled in the Blue Grass State, where he died. Her father studied medicine and began practice as a homeopathic physician. He also learned the trade of stone and brick mason. He came to California in 1852, crossing the plains with an ox team. He stopped for a while in Alameda county, and then, in 1854, located on the grant now called Hollister. He thought it was Government land, and made improvements, but after several years found that it was still a grant, and that he must lose everything. He then moved to the Penoche country, where he took up land; but this he soon gave up. He returned to San Juan, where he remained for several years, and then in succession moved to Gilroy and San Jose, farming and raising cattle. Finally reaching the Highlands, he homesteaded and proved up on a tract, which he later sold. He then retired to San Juan, where he died at the age of seventy-nine. His wife was Miss Elizabeth Clark, before her marriage. She was a native of Illinois, who crossed the plains with friends in a party that included Dr. Shepherd, to whom she was married on her arrival in California. At Gilroy she breathed her last, the mother of nine children, five of whom are still living. Mrs. Willson, who passed her childhood in the San Juan district and was educated at the public schools there, was the eldest of all ; while the others are Mrs. Mary Beckwith, of Gilroy; Mrs. Martha Blackwell, of Stanislaus county ; Mrs. Laura Prather, of Kings county ; and Eugene N. Shepherd, of Arizona. The children of Mr. and Mrs. Henry S. Willson are Lillie. Otherwise known as Mrs. Lyman Willson, of Gilroy; Edith, who married Mike Barba, of Creston ; Hazel, who is Mrs. Ramon Barba, of the same place; Harry, who lives at Carissa Plains ; Edward,

who is in Carpinteria ; Dan, who is a rancher at Templor Mountain, Kern county ; and Winifred and Mabel, who live at home with their parents.

Never wanting in the matter of a response to civic duty, and always willing to participate actively in any movement for the expansion and uplift of his community, Mr. Willson takes a keen interest in politics, generally voting according to Republican standards. In the service of that party he has been a member of the County Central Committee.