

CHAPTER 3

**THE WESTERN PART OF THE RANCH -
FROM SETTLEMENT TO 1926**

THE ASBILL FAMILY



Asbill's ancient apple tree by Michael's Vineyard is completely hollow but still bears fruit.

The name Asbill Valley Ranch goes all the way back to the first pioneer family living here:

In 1859, Doc W. Asbill and family moved into Lake County and homesteaded acreage in and around Asbill Valley. The Asbill family lived there for many years – long enough to have Asbill Creek and Asbill Valley named for them...

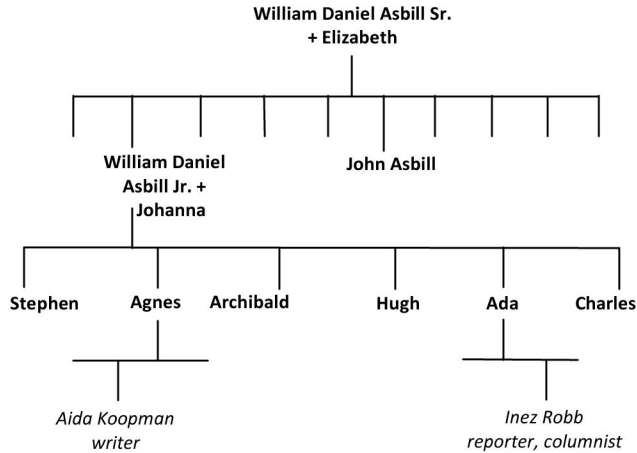
Asbill raised stock here and had about 100 acres of farm land. It now belongs to Mr. Brookins who runs sheep.

(Mauldin Collection)

According to the Mauldin collection, the Asbills originally lived on a parcel close to our front gate and later, they moved further into the valley. An ancient apple tree by Michael's Vineyard is located on the piece of land where the family settled first, so I imagine they had their first cabin close by. Another site in Asbill Valley has rusty nails and small pieces of pottery and glass scattered in the grass, so maybe here was the second home.

The Asbill family came from Dade County, Missouri. William Daniel Asbill Sr. (1805 – 1875) was of English heritage, born in Kentucky. His wife Elizabeth (1820 – 1887) was born in Tennessee. The couple brought their 10 children, 8 girls and 2 boys.

In the 1860 Census, the oldest son John (1841-1913) was counted together with his young wife and infant child but apparently, the rest of the family hadn't settled down in the valley yet. Lake County wouldn't be established until the following year, so the family was enumerated in Clearlake Township, Napa County. Ten years later, in the 1870 Census, the Asbills were counted in Lower Lake, Lake County. Now John and two of his sisters lived in a house in Asbill Valley together with their parents. Sadly, there was no mention of John's wife and child. Most likely, both died in the 1860s.



Some of the Asbills who walked our land

In 1870, the youngest son, William Daniel Jr. (1849-1901) and his wife Johanna (1851-1925) had their own household as neighbors to William's parents. Apparently, the six adult girls had moved away from home at this time.

William Daniel Sr. died in 1875, and the widowed Elizabeth claimed homestead on the land. According to the homestead document, the property was "being well known and described as the Asbill Ranch." Four years later she married George Bishop, the man who gave name to Bishop Mountain.

After William Daniel Sr.'s death, Junior and Johanna carried on the work at the ranch. We have a lot of information about the family and the life on the ranch because the couple had two granddaughters who were excellent writers.

In her family history book *The Koopman/Asbill Branch*, Aida Koopman told about the family background and the romance of her grandparents. William was 10 years old when his family crossed the Great Plains in covered wagons, and the



William Daniel Jr. and Johanna Asbill with their six children, Charles, Stephen, Ada, Agnes, Archibald, Hugh

story goes that he walked all the way and helped drive the cattle. Johanna left her family and native Ireland behind when she was 14 years old, working as a nursemaid for a family that was immigrating to California. As a young lady, Johanna worked as a cook's helper near Vacaville, and that's where her path crossed William's. One day when she was fishing in Putah Creek, her hook got entangled in some bushes. William happened to come by on his horse, and he helped Johanna salvage the fishing gear. The following day he came back to tell Johanna that he would like to marry her – "the prettiest little Irish girl he had ever seen". The two married young and raised four boys and two girls on Asbill Ranch.

Inez Robb, another granddaughter of William Jr. and Johanna, was a newspaper reporter. She described her grandparents' ranch as "the first dude ranch in the United States – just for free." Through her writing we get a direct peek into the

dining room in Asbill Valley in the 1890's where the big farmhouse, in her words, "rocked with guests":

Such was Grandfather's extensive hospitality that three basic fixtures of the Sunday menu were always a big roast turkey, a ham and a rib roast of beef. And neighbors were welcome.

(The Post Standard, Syracuse, New York, March 19, 1960)

William Daniel Jr. died unexpectedly from myocarditis in 1901, just a few days shy of his 52nd birthday. From the probate records, we get a snapshot of the property. The improved farm consisted of 560 acres of land at a value of about \$5,600. There were about 100 head of cattle and calves, 11 head of horses and colts, 20 head of hogs and pigs, and 223 head of sheep. Sale of wool, hay and grain was high on the list of income, and one of the annual expenses was rent of land on a ranch close by, the Phelan Ranch.

After Junior's death, the next generation took over the farming, and more land was purchased. When Archibald Asbill sold the ranch in 1926 as executor of the estate after Johanna's death, it consisted of about 900 acres. (See map on p. 50).

About 25 years after the ranch was sold, Inez published a piece about her uncle Archibald. Apparently, he held on to the rural lifestyle all his life:

Uncle Arch, who is crowding 77, keeps young by riding and hunting. He still has the gently bowed legs of a man reared in the saddle and inured to weeks on the range. And when he used to drive an open touring car he mounted it exactly as he would a horse. Just threw his leg over the side of the car, scorning to open the door, and settled himself as in a saddle. Then he kicked the accelerator with his spurs and was off in a cloud of dust.

(Mansfield News Journal, Ohio, April 30, 1951)

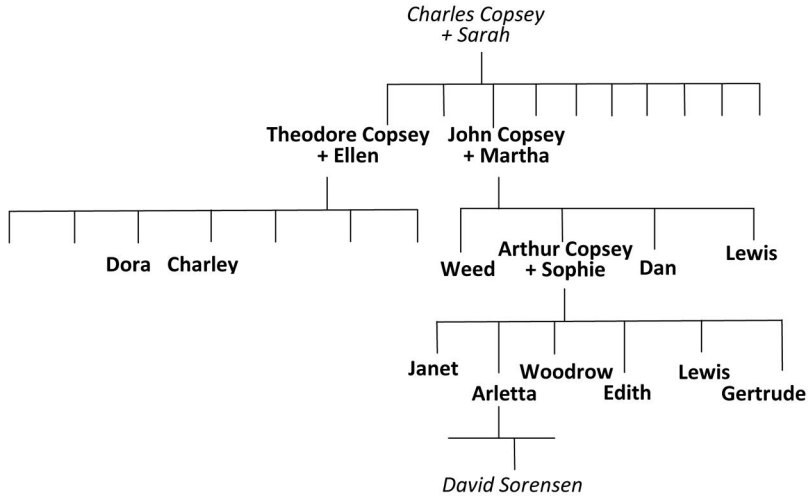
THE COPSEYS



Turkeys frolicking under Theodore Copsey's pear tree by Else's Vineyard

The roots of our friend David Sorensen go back to the very first settlers in the area, and several of his ancestors have walked our land. Charles Copsey, David's great-great grandfather was the leader of the "Copsey Wagon Train" that arrived in Lake County in 1856. It took the 40 covered wagons about six months to cross the plains from Dade County, Missouri. Most of the Copsey clan settled a couple of miles south of Lower Lake where the Copsey Creek still carries their name, but a few members ventured away from the family to live on land that is now part of Six Sigma Ranch.

I consider David to be a walking encyclopedia of history, and it is interesting to see that his grandfather, Arthur Copsey (1876-1964), had a similar role – on a much bigger scale – two generations back when Henry Mauldin was recording his comprehensive oral history of Lake County. I was thrilled



Some of the Copseys who walked our land

when, more than 40 years after Arthur's death, I found his stories in the files, told by a guy who was actually here way back when:

Arthur Copsey was perhaps the one individual that gave more information about Lake County than any other informant. He was born, raised, went to school, married, raised a family, took an interest in local affairs, made a living and died in the Lower Lake area. (Mauldin Collection)

Arthur's father, John Copsey (1840-1928) and his wife Martha (1852-1943) made their home on land that is now the far western part of Six Sigma Ranch. In 1879 John bought property from the original settlers, the Gloyd Family. John and Martha later claimed homestead on the land that is still known as the Copsey Place, and this is where they raised Arthur and his three brothers.

Arthur mainly described his father as a down-to-earth farmer and a person who could be found hauling freight and



Martha and John Copsey with three of their sons: Dan, Arthur and Weed

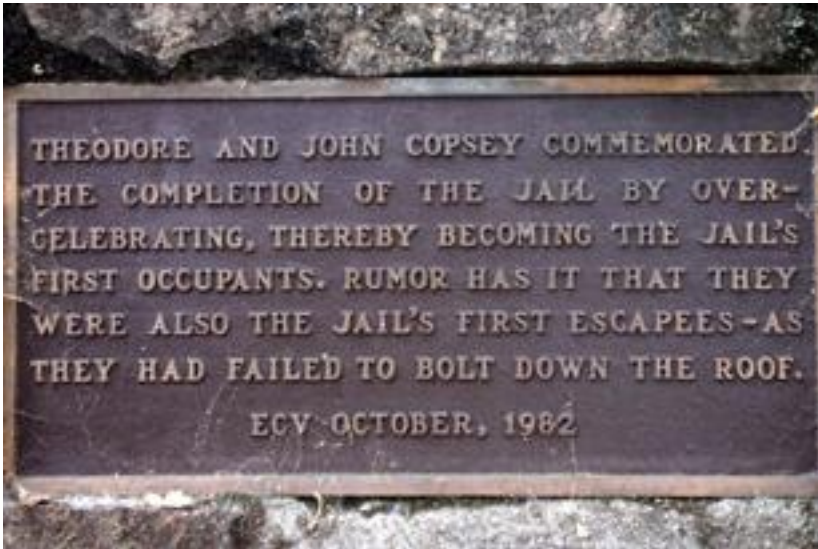
"doing some blasting". It must have been a bit out of the ordinary when John and his brother Theodore were first jailed, then honored with a plaque, after they finished a special building project:

John and Theodore Copsey built the present Lower Lake Stone Jail. When they finished it, they promptly disturbed the peace (possibly on purpose to be the first customers) and were put in it.

(Mauldin Collection)

John Copsey kept farming into old age. In the 1920 Census, at age 79, he was listed as "farming with son" in the household of Weed Copsey who was a grain farmer.

Arthur took over the Copsey Place after his parents, and he was the one who built the Copsey House that is still (year 2011) standing on Spruce Grove Road. David Sorensen explained that the lumber for the house was milled around 1921 at the saw mill owned by Arthur and his brother Weed on the other side of Spruce Grove Road. The brothers also milled



Plaque on the Historic Jail House in Lower Lake



The Copsey House on Spruce Grove Road



Arthur and Sophie Copsy with their four oldest children, Edith, Gertrude, Lewis and Woodrow

lumber for other building projects. One of the buildings was a cabin built just east of our ranch by a man named George Lee. Very conveniently, George paid for the lumber with whiskey he had distilled in a still he kept in the canyon not far from the building site.

Arthur and his wife Sophie raised two boys and four girls. When they left the Copsy Place to their youngest daughter, Janet, three generations of Copses had walked that corner of Six Sigma Ranch.

John's brother, Theodore Copsy (1845-1926) was also a farmer. Theodore and his wife Ellen (1859-1923) settled on 160 acres a couple of miles from John and Martha's place and lived there for many years raising their seven children. The family got their land patent in 1890. I found the following description of the family's home site:

Theodore Copsy and family lived on the south side and at the lower end of the large part of Asbill Valley,



David Sorensen digging at Theodore Copsey's home site



Some of the "treasures" we found on the site

and on the south side of Asbill Creek, up in a little draw.

(Mauldin Collection)

A patch of iris on a hillside gave away the location of the site, and when David and I searched the area with a metal detector, we soon found rusty nails and equipment parts scattered around some rocks outlining the foundation of a house. Some of the nails were square nails that mainly went out of use in the period 1890-1900, so this supports our theory that the site dates back to the original settlement.

We assume that the ancient pear tree growing nearby belonged to Theodore and his family. The tree is pictured on page 10.

THE SMITH FAMILY



Iris patch and fruit trees in the Smith Family's garden

Thomas (Tom) H. Smith and his family settled land as neighbors to the Asbills and to Theodore Copsey's family. (See map on p.3). We have the following description of the Smith homestead:

Tom Smith and family lived for a while at the extreme eastern part of [Asbill] Valley many years ago. A few scattered fruit trees are all that remain of their home site. Norval Brookins now owns all of Asbill Valley.

(Mauldin Collection)

David Sorensen showed me the fruit trees that still remain: an apple tree, a black walnut tree, and a grafted English walnut tree growing in the middle of a big patch of iris plants. Another apple tree disappeared into the creek years ago. "My Uncle Woodrow told me that those trees were planted by the original settlers," he said, "but I'm not sure what the name of the family was."

Now we know that the settlers were Tom Smith and his wife Lois Anna.

Tom Henry Smith ... came to Lower Lake around the late 1860s and in a year or so married Anna [Lois] Suits...

[Later], Mr. Smith took up a homestead, joining the Asbill Ranch. Here [the family] stayed 22 years. The Asbill ranch had good soil near the creek.

(Mauldin Collection)

Very likely, Tom and Lois planted a vegetable garden on the strip of good soil between their house and the creek.

According to the family history of Mable Anna Dean, one of Tom and Lois' granddaughters, Tom was born in New York in 1834. He was a stone mason by trade, cutting stones for fireplaces and making many headstones for graves. Some of his well-known major works from the 1890s were the stone dining room and bath houses at the nearby Siegler Springs Resort.

In 1904, Tom and Lois deeded the land to their son in law, Sterling Alexander Dean, Mable Anna's father, and Mable Anna and her family moved into the valley. A few years later, Tom died in Lower Lake.

SPRUCE GROVE SCHOOL

Report of Spruce Grove School.

Following is the report of Spruce Grove District for the month ending September 21st, 1892.

Dora Copsey	98	Agnes Asbill	92
Stephen Asbill	94	Dora Hintou	90
Ira Kouns	93	Lisle Kouns	95
Bertha Kouns	91	Weed Copsey	88
Charley Copsey	89	Cave Kirtley	93
Arthur Copsey	80	Maud Kirtley	84
Thomas Smith	85	Gideon Smith	82

Number scholars enrolled, 16.
Dora Fitz Maurice, teacher.

Middletown Independent Newspaper, 15. Oct 1892

Spruce Grove's one-room school was located on Spruce Grove Road on a piece of property that has on-and-off been included in the Asbill Valley Ranch. When the last schoolhouse closed its doors in the early 1930s, countless kids had crossed our land as they walked home from school.

In 1917, a fire that burned the former school house was described in the local newspaper:

... the cause of the fire apparently being from a defective stovepipe. The entire building was a total loss, nothing being saved except the personal effects of the teacher, Mrs. Susie Wallman, who lived in the building. She did not even save the school register or any of the other records...

(Lake County Bee, March 28, 1917)

Although no records were salvaged, we can still find information on the children attending the school, since the newspapers brought occasional updates in articles like the one pictured on the previous page. The class roster from 1892 listed sixteen kids, and we know from other sources that at least eight of the sixteen lived on what is now Six Sigma Ranch. I imagine how Theodore Copsey's two kids, Dora and Charley walked their two cousins Arthur and Weed home to the Copsey Place on Spruce Grove Road, then continued to Asbill Valley with their friends Tom and Gideon Smith and the Asbill kids, Stephen and Agnes, splashing in the creek and picking wildflowers on the hillsides.

THE STAGE COACH



The original house at the site of the stage coach stop

According to a friend of ours, Dave Brookins, the site where we now have our tasting room used to be a stop on the stage route going out east to the quicksilver mines in Knoxville. David explained that the original house on the site was a bigger two-story building. Since the Asbills were the first settlers on the land and owned it well into the 1920s, I assume that they built the original house. "There was a similar stage coach house on the old Palmer place about 10 miles east on Morgan Valley Road," Dave said. "That house is also gone now but you can still see the fireplace and the chimney from the road."

Dave pointed out a site by our tasting room where there used to be a well where the travelers could water their horses. The old well was filled up, but the brick casing was still intact. We had the structure cleaned up and had a new casing installed, and the old well is now functional again.



The "revived" old well by our tasting room

Other long-time Lake County residents have relayed similar information about a stage route on our land but I have not been able to find any confirmation in the records. George Bishop (the man Elizabeth Asbill married after William Asbill Sr. died) was listed in a business directory as stage owner but, of course, there is no information on the route traveled by his stage line.

When the Kleemans developed a dude ranch here in the 1960s, they took up the stage coach tradition and purchased an old Wells Fargo coach for their guests to ride.

LIONS AND TIGERS AND BEARS – OH MY !



A bear photographed from the back porch of the house we now live in

The great outdoors was not for the faint of heart. The following story started close to where we now have our tasting room and ended three days later two miles further west, by our front gate.

In the 1860's, a hide buyer shot a female grizzly bear at the extreme lower end of Asbill Valley. He only wounded her and she in turn attacked him. She chewed him up badly and was getting the best of the deal when he hit her in the mouth with his fist. She left him but only after she had torn off part of his face and nose, which left him an extremely ugly man. He could not walk but could crawl. For three days and nights he crawled, trying to hit the immigrant road just west of the head of Asbill Valley. John Copsey was hauling freight on the road at that time and heard him call. Stopping his oxen he went down hill in some brush and

found the hide buyer, who was in bad shape by that time.

(Mauldin Collection)

Allegedly, the story involves a grizzly bear. Fortunately, only black bears are supposed to be living in the area now, and we believe they will leave us alone if we don't bother them. However, when Russell Rustici showed us a photo he had taken of a bear rummaging through his trash cans, we decided to keep our trash under close-fitting lids.

Other creatures that could pose more danger are the mountain lions that occasionally have been known to attack and consume a person. We know they are out here. After hiking home in the snow from an outing to the back of the ranch, David Sorensen reported that he and his friend saw mountain lion paw prints that were not there on their way out. The beast had been stalking them. On the positive side, easier prey is plentiful and the lions don't seem to be interested in us.

Since we came from Kansas, the domain of the Wizard of Oz, we couldn't help laughing when we first heard of lions and bears. Immediately, "Lions, and tigers, and bears, oh my!" came to mind. We are thankful that tigers don't seem to be an issue on the ranch.

