



## *2024 Greetings to visitors, friends and benefactors of The Sturgeon's Mill Restoration Project*

**May 4-5, June 15-16 (Fathers Day), Aug. 3-4 and Sept. 14-15**

*The President's Message - Tom Schaeffer* **Sturgeons Mill Celebrates 100 Years**



Before I began writing this brief history of Wade Sturgeon along with the humble beginnings of Sturgeons Mill, I found a quote in his autobiography with a warning "I doubt it is a good idea to dig too deep in one's family history...and it may be best to cover rather than uncover the footprints of the past". Being forewarned, I will skip the rumors of train robbers and bootleggers and move forward with subjects, keeping skeletons in the closet where they belong.

Wade's family came to Sonoma County, California during the gold rush from Dent County

Missouri. Wade's father, John E. Sturgeon, married Lena Amelia Michael in October 1877 while he was in charge of a cattle company called the Panama Ranch owned by Miller & Lux holdings. Wade was born Dec. 29 1878. His sister Irene followed, born Dec. 10, 1880. Life changed for the family when Wade's Dad, John, died Feb. 25, 1883 leaving Mom and two young children. Shortly thereafter, Wade, Irene, Mom and Grandmother moved to Sonoma County, just west of Occidental where they purchased a home on Joy Rd. To Wade it was heaven! He loved spending time among the cool fragrant redwood forests, its many creeks and streams abundant with wildlife. He held a great reverence in the beauty and strength of the mighty redwoods for all of his life.

Wade's job as a young man involved much toil and sweat, splitting firewood, shakes, and fence rails, cleaning stables and working in a small box mill. Wade and two friends decided to give up those back breaking jobs and planned to head to Sonora to strike it rich in the gold fields and live the good life. Several days later they were back home, tired and broke looking forward to returning to their old jobs with nothing to show for it, except a great and memorable adventure!

May 28, 1905 Wade and Esther Friberg-Lapham were wed. Soon two sons were brought into the world, Ralph Sonoma on Nov. 23, 1907, then Merl Andrew on Sept. 25, 1911. Needing to make more than wages to support his family he decided to go into business for himself by starting his own sawmill. With a small loan from his old friend "Boss" Meeker he purchased some used equipment from the old Korbel Brothers Mill for the huge sum of \$700. The year was 1912 when he began construction of the mill in Coleman Valley on what was known as the Sugarloaf and in 1914 the sound of lumber being sawn filled the valley. Life was good as he began his new career.

By 1923 most of the timber had been harvested on that site and a new tract of timber land was found west of Sebastopol on Green Hill Road on what was known as the Gallagher Tract. The year 1923 was spent dismantling the mill, transporting it, and then reassembling it. In 1924 a partnership was established with John W. Gonnella and Joe Donati for the next chapter. The old Joshua Hendy head rig was retained in the move, but other machinery was upgraded. Most notably being the Atlas steam engine powering the head rig. The partnership of Donati, Gonnella and Sturgeon was dissolved in 1942 and the mill was purchased by Wade's son Ralph and Ralph's good friend, James E. Henningsen who continued to improve production by modernizing the mills equipment and logging practices. But even with making many changes, the efforts were in vain. The old steam powered mill was no longer able to compete with modern band saw mills. Sturgeons Mill ceased operations in 1963. Wade passed away in 1957 after living a simple but full life. He had said "none of the relatives were blessed with much wealth. We passed through droughts, floods, earthquakes, recessions, depressions and pandemics and never once asked for aid. We just dug in a little harder."

In the late 1990's Sturgeons Mill began yet another chapter in its life as a non-profit working museum. Come join us and our over 50 volunteers in celebrating our 100th year, 1924-2024 on this site! But that is a story yet to be told!

### ***Woodland Gardens Essie Doty, Secretary/Treasurer***

When I was a child and visited my Grandparents, Wade and Esther Sturgeon, it was always special. To visit the garden just outside their home was always a treat, never knowing what I would find. The Mulberry trees had fruit that was slightly sweet (but mostly sour) . Grandma would take me on walks through the garden and explained the beautiful blooms. She would take me for walks up the canyon where there was a waterfall, wild flowers and lots of ferns. Once we saw a glow worm out near the road but I never saw another one. There was a field of wild flowers called "shooting stars", lots of Indian Paint Brush, some Trilliums nestled beside ferns and Huckleberry bushes. Grandma loved flowers and also rocks. She said she would have liked to have studied geology.

One of my favorite memories is coming into their house and finding fresh baked bread (baked in a wood stove.) I never knew how hard life was for her as she always had time for my brother and me. Imagine cooking on a wood stove, preparing 3 meals a day for Grandpa, working in the garden, entertaining many visitors who wanted to see the beautiful garden, plus always having time for her grandchildren.

The old house is gone, as are the Grandparents, but the memories stay with us. Many happy times that we try to bring to the family and friends of today by passing those memories along.



### ***Editor's Corner Harvey Henningsen***

We are celebrating the 100th anniversary of Sturgeon's Mill being at the same location on Green Hill Road in Sebastopol, CA. Board Secretary Essie Doty and President Tom Schaeffer, write in their columns about Wade & Esther Sturgeon and their involvement with this sawmill in the early years. As Wade Sturgeon approached retirement he wanted to sell his sawmill to his son Ralph. Being short of funds to help finance the purchase; Ralph turned to his Analy High School friend Jim Henningsen.

The lifelong idea for the survival and restoration of Sturgeons Mill began on a cold foggy morning during summer vacation of 1957 as a 12 year old boy sat on top of the sawmills boiler where it was nice and toasty warm. He watched the operation of the mill with the same fascination that we see in our visitors' eyes today as they visit our 19th century working museum.

All of the boy's senses were filled with the sounds of the saw blades biting into the logs and lumber, the smell of the turpentine scent in the air from the Douglas Fir logs being milled, the smoke from the burning scrap lumber and sawdust



from the boiler's fire boxes below. The old sawmill was vibrating, moving and trembling as logs from the log-deck were pulled into the sawmill. While the lumber was milled and processed he saw the 12 crewmembers moving in concert communicating only with hand gestures and facial expressions and working in perfect harmony. It was like watching an industrial ballet, both fascinating and beautiful! Most of all the young boy loved and was fascinated by the steam engines. As he watched and felt this symphony of the senses he said to himself, "This sawmill will always be here and some day people will come to see it." The years passed with Sturgeon's Mill, powered by steam, with too many crew-members and not able to remain profitable compared to other modern sawmills.

In 1963 Jim Henningsen & Ralph Sturgeon decided to shut the old outdated sawmill down. In 1964 they decided to call in the metal-scrapers to cut up the machinery for scrap steel. Upon hearing this the young boy told his dad, "please don't cut up the steam engines." His dad's reply, "If you want the dang steam engines so bad you can have my half of the sawmill's partnership." So, his son became partners with Ralph Sturgeon for almost 30 years as the Mill slumbered and started leaning towards the nearby Purington creek.

Some 30 years later The Sturgeon's Mill Restoration Project was born with the first meeting on January 27,1992 with a crew of 3 historians. A year later Bob Sturgeon joined us and then we had 7 crewmembers. Today we have about 50 volunteer crewmembers who continue to restore the sawmill, repair 100-year-old equipment and mill the lumber from logs. Our crewmembers help our visitors "Step Back into History" by answering questions and explaining how everything works.

A boy had a dream in 1957. Sometimes childhood dreams come true!

In 2024 visit us and help celebrate 100 years of steam power & sawmilling at Green Hill Road.

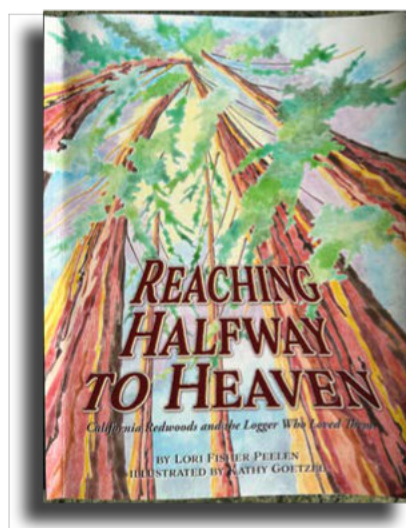
## ***Nuts & Bolts, Sawdust & Steam Harvey Henningsen***

Happy New Year to our friends, patrons and volunteers from all of us at Sturgeons Mill. We are celebrating our Centennial of 100 years at the same location on Green Hill Road. We enjoyed a terrific 2023 with our friendly docents helping over 4,000 visitors "Step Back into History" at our world class working museum. Guests continue to arrive from all over the U.S. and around the world.

Our cook shack volunteers continue to serve delicious lunches to our guests and volunteers accompanied by live music of the 11-piece "Bohemian Ukulele Band." Enjoy tasty food, at old fashioned prices, served by our friendly volunteer crewmembers.

Celebrity chef Guy Fieri gives a thumbs-up to our cook shack. Guy's mom is part of our shack's crew. Our sawmill is looking for additional crewmembers to join our cook shack crew. If you are interested in becoming a crewmember of our cook shack please contact President Tom Schaeffer. Email [tom@sturgeonsmill.com](mailto:tom@sturgeonsmill.com) and join our crew at this world class working museum.

Our volunteers that you see working at our steam-ups work here all year long. They continue to show up during the Winter at our first Saturday of the month work days. Our volunteers work rain or shine creating new historical viewing and photo opportunities for you. At our last work day our volunteers arrived on a rainy Saturday morning. We had our mandatory safety meeting and they organized themselves into crews to demolished part of our storage shed creating more parking spaces. Another crew of carpenters & builders set to remodeling & extending our history center. A crew of engineers, machinists and mechanics started re-routing some steam lines, removing the 1915 Fairbanks Morse hit-n-miss diesel engine that powered our late-1800's flat-bed planer and replaced it with an early 1900's Struthers, Wells steam engine. Swapping the steam engine for the diesel hit-n-miss will create historical continuity for our visitors to see how steam powered various machines of the industrial revolution. Other crews continue caring for the "Woodland Gardens" and provide sawmill maintenance. Our



volunteers bring an amazing array of skill sets to these workdays. The projects are selected and the crew forms up their specialty teams. At the end of the day, everything is accomplished.

Student Education continues to be a big hit with the local schools. The two student education days for 2024 are the Thursdays of April 25 and Oct. 3. Student Education days are offered to students in 4th grade through college age students. Teachers or parents interested in reserving a space for a class visit please contact Harvey Henningsen: [hhartist@sonic.net](mailto:hhartist@sonic.net)

Lori Fisher Peelen's "Reaching Halfway to Heaven," a children's book about Wade Sturgeon's life has arrived and is available through the sawmill's online store [go to our website] or at our next demonstration runs. To find out more about the author and the book Click Here or go to the Sturgeons Mill website. The book is beautifully illustrated, a joy to read to children or for young readers. It chronicles the real-life experiences of Wade Sturgeon. It is an early West County tale of growing up and working in the woods. "Reaching Halfway to Heaven" is also available at her website: <https://www.streamriffs.com/books/p/reaching-halfway-to-heaven>. A portion of the proceeds are directed to Sturgeons Mill Restoration Project and to Save the Redwoods League. Scroll Down for more about the book.



***Your financial support is needed.  
Please send tax deductible donations to:***

***Sturgeon's Mill Restoration Project***

**2150 Green Hill Road**

**Sebastopol, CA 95472**

**[www.sturgeonsmill.com](http://www.sturgeonsmill.com)**

**707-829-2479**

**2024 Run Dates, 10 AM to 3 PM (no dogs, please):**

**May 4-5**

**June 15-16 (Father's day)**

**August 3-4**

**September 14-15**





## Reaching Halfway to Heaven – the backstory

My Uncle Harv asked me how I came to write a picture book about Wade Sturgeon- so here is the story he requested...

I grew up across the road from Sturgeon's Mill, where my grandpa, Jim Henningsen, Mom's father, was co-owner of the old steam-run lumber mill. My earliest memories include hearing the steam whistle blow to begin and end the workday and going down to visit my grandpa where he kept a file cabinet of black jellybeans and Hershey bars. My mom finally put a note on me that said "do not feed" – which he pretty much ignored. The taste of a black jellybean still instantly brings back memories of my grandpa.

Even though I was a shy child, I was comfortable around the mill workers, and they let me roam around the property quite a bit. The mill closed when I was in the first grade, replaced by fuel-run engines, and it sat silent, for nearly half a century. As a kid, I somehow considered the abandoned mill my own property and continued to play there after school.

One day, when I was around eight or nine, I was playing near a large, twisted redwood near the abandoned mill, and found an old journal (which planted the seed for me to write this book, nearly half a century later.)

Wade Sturgeon, the man who built and owned the mill, long before my family was in the picture, obviously loved the same twisty tree. When I confessed my long-ago discovery, Lavonne, Bob, Essie and Tom Sturgeon kindly gave me access to the dozens and dozens of handwritten journals that Wade kept nearly until he died. I spent the next several years pouring over these journals, and (I still have a few left to finish.)

We all interpret stories differently. Some reading these journals might see a story about fishing in the Russian River- as Wade loved to fish. Some would see a deer-hunting story, or just a logging story. Some would be intrigued by local names and historical events.

But I am a people person, and a plant person too- so I plucked out the thread of the young gardener, the would-be botanist who needed to support his family the only way he knew how- by becoming a logger. I plucked another thread of the shy young man with a painful crush on a beautiful classmate named Esther, (who was being courted by another, richer classmate, just as Wade was forced to leave school to support his family.) What I'm saying is, lives are a complex tapestry, and this picture book is just a few threads of Wade's long and complex life.

From what I remember, from all these journals, Wade was born near Lake Tulare in late 1800's. His father seems to have been scholarly, and a writer. His mother loved flowers and gardening. Wade took after them both, collecting seeds everywhere he went. He planned on being scientist- specifically a botanist- and he loved to write.

Wade's dad died when he was young, leaving Mrs. Sturgeon alone with two little kids. I believe she had a job cooking for workers in Baker's Field (now known as Bakersfield) where a man passing through, a seasonal worker perhaps, fell for her, and eventually persuaded her to marry him and move her family to Occidental, where he worked as a logger.

Life in the redwoods was different for Wade – much wetter and darker, and harder to garden in. Wade's new Pa seemed to me a good man, but he didn't have much use for books and schooling, and he leaned hard on Wade to leave school to come work in the woods with him. Wade resisted – but as new Pa's health eroded, Wade gave in.

New Pa appears to have had a lung disease that was worsening, and he needed help supporting the family. Wade wrote of his regret leaving behind his classmates, his studies, and especially Esther, the girl he couldn't stop thinking of. But school was a luxury, and all too soon, his stepfather too, passed away, and Wade was the sole supporter of his family.

Still, Wade studied on his own, by candlelight, learning all he could about plants and gardening. He tried going to college in San Francisco for a while, but when his mom and sister couldn't make it on their own, he had leave school once again.

Eventually, Wade got the girl, started his saw mill, and raised up a family of his own. He planted a botanical garden. Every day, he wrote in his journal.

As I read Wade's journals, the events, and relationships that shaped him, he began to feel like a friend. In one of his early journals, he remarked that he would never want to hurt anyone by recording something hurtful. In the stacks of journals, I read, though he clearly had strong opinions, I never read a single unkind word.

“Reaching Halfway to Heaven” is told through some of Wade's words, and some my own. The title comes from a poem he tore out of a local newspaper in one of his journals, called “Halfway to Heaven.” I hope you enjoy the stunning artwork, by Kathy Goetzel, a local artist, which brings Wade's story to life.

Information about redwoods and Sturgeon's mill is also included, including resources for teachers, and historical photos, curtesy of the Sturgeon Family. Thank you especially to Lavonne, and the entire Sturgeon family for your generosity and help during this process.

“Reaching Halfway to Heaven” is available at Amazon Books, or at my website, [www.Streamriffs.com](http://www.Streamriffs.com). A portion of the proceeds are directed to Sturgeons Mill Restoration Project, and to Save the Redwoods League.

# Then and Now

## Our Centennial Year at Green Hill Road





