

# On the trail of Bonnie Buckeye

by *Laura Cooskey with Becky Enberg*

*Oh where, tell me where was your buckeye cabin made?  
'Twas built among the merry boys who wield the plow  
and spade  
Where the log cabins stand, in the bonnie buckeye shade.*

*Oh what, tell me what is to be your cabin's fate?  
We'll wheel it to the capital and place it there elate  
For a token and a sign of the bonnie Buckeye State.*

These lines were well-known to almost every American about a century before Bonnie Buckeye appeared in the Mattole country. They helped win the 1840 national election for Whig William Henry Harrison, old "Tippecanoe," in a singing campaign pitching simple pioneer virtues against aristocratic foppery. Harrison's symbols were a log cabin decorated with raccoon skins and a string of buckeye nuts; because of this homespun frontiersman motif, and the popularity of the Buckeye Cabin song, Ohio became known as the Buckeye State.

Bernice Cundiff was the name of our heroine when she first came here and decided she liked the hills around Buckeye Mountain. Russell Chambers probably quipped that she must be Bonnie Buckeye herself—at any rate, he gave her the name, and it stuck, although many reverse it to Buckeye Bonnie; Mary Rackliff Etter called her "Buckeye Queen."

Trish Stefanik included the nickname credit to Russell in her Bonnie Buckeye monologue, created for a Cabaret with the theme "In Praise of the Women of the Mattole." I had read of Bonnie in a couple of the local history books, but Trish's one-woman performance brought her character to life and made me want to know more about this supposed hermit-woman, tougher and more capable in the wild than many a man twice her size, with a heart of gold and a past she'd left far behind.

When Becky (East) Enberg was growing up, her mother, Elizabeth (Liz) Roberts, enjoyed a unique friendship with this unforgettable woman. Becky has wisely taken some time to write down her memories of Bonnie, and her essay will form the basis of this sketch. Becky grew up on the Roberts Ranch, down Conklin Creek Road where the Browns now live. Her stepfather

was Lloyd Roberts, and the East and Lockwood children of Liz were soon joined by sister Lloydene Roberts, in 1940. I will print Becky's story in italics, and insert extra information in straight type.

## REMEMBERING BERNICE (BONNIE) CUNDIFF

by *Becky Enberg*

*I remember Bonnie as being the lady that lived at Buckeye, which was about five miles beyond our ranch up Conklin Creek. She was known to many by just the name of "Bonnie Buckeye." She lived in a cabin that was only on the side of the hill. Lloyd (my step-father) had known her for many years. I never did hear exactly how old she was, but Lloyd told the story that she came up to the valley when she was only 18 years old from Santa Rosa, where her family lived. She rode a horse named Stormy and had a couple dogs. I believe she had gone to college in Santa Rosa. Her parents lived on Sonoma Mountain Road, east of Santa Rosa. They had a prune orchard, grape vineyard, and other fruit trees. She had two brothers named Don and Russell. Russell is the one I knew best. I visited the home place with my parents a couple times and met their mother too. I remember Bonnie coming to our home and cooking and taking care of the house when my mother was confined to bed a couple times. One time was when Mother had the running ulcer on her leg and the Doctor told her to stay down for a few months. Bonnie was a wonderful cook or at least I don't remember anyone ever not liking what she fixed. When she was there she read me lots of poetry and I will always remember she could really read well, and I loved to hear her tell stories. This may have been around 1940 or so.*

Becky added that Bonnie liked to read "Dangerous Dan McGrew," and taught her sister to recite this poem. She also read them lots of Robert Louis Stevenson. "I'd never heard anyone read like that before, with such expression!"

And just for the record, one local woman remembers her father always reminding the kids before a visit, "We're not hungry and we're not staying for dinner!" He just didn't like Coon Stew, apparently.

*She also sent away to either Sears Roebuck or Montgomery Ward's and bought me an Autoharp. That was such a nice thing for her to do and I still have the*

*Autoharp, but never learned to play it very good. I tried and tried over the years though.*

*My Mother liked Bonnie and they hunted deer and wild pigs lots of times. Mother loved riding her horse, Blackie, out to Buckeye and staying with Bonnie. She did this many, many times. Lloyd and other men from the Valley always enjoyed hunting with Bonnie. She always knew just where the big buck was or where the pigs were at that certain time.*

*She had quite a sense of humor. Lloyd told the story that Charlie Roscoe (he was a government hunter) and Hap Stewart were riding their horses along the trail and watching for animal tracks. They came upon a wet spot on the trail and got off to smell, as though they could tell if it were a bobcat or wildcat or whatever. They both smelled and said, "I can't tell, never smelled anything like it before." They went further up and around the bend and there was Bonnie and her dogs. They had quite a laugh and Lloyd loved telling that story many times.*

*One time her dogs got distemper and died. Lloyd said she put them in her cabin and set it all afire to get rid of the disease. Several men got together and built her another cabin, but she never liked it as well. She lived in a hollow log for quite a few years too. I went out one time to hunt in the area and stopped to see her in her hollow log. It was a fallen tree that had burned out and formed a good roof. She and her dogs lived under this with a tarp over the opening. She offered me some meat that she told me was "Bobcat." I remember it being kind of stringy, so don't know if it was or not.*

*During World War II, she had a couple hollowed-out roots of trees that she said if we were attacked or invaded, we were to come to the hills and they would not find us. She had supplies stashed in different places also. My Mother knew where these trees were and was serious about going there as she knew it was really secluded. Fortunately, we never had to do this.*

*Lloyd said that Bonnie spent some time with him taking care of his mother before she died. I believe she [Hattie Roberts] died somewhere about 1933-35. Bonnie stayed at our house off and on several times over the years. One time she was there and was real sick. She stayed upstairs in bed for days and would not come down.*

*She even taught Lloydene (my sister) to swim. It was up by Joe Etter's gate. She had Lloydene in the water with her dogs and she did learn to dog paddle like the dog.*

*Lloyd Brubaker also had a homestead a little further out in the hills from Bonnie close to the Vanscourt Slide. He and Bonnie sometimes did not agree*

*on things and would do little tricks on each other. There was also a man who lived at Cooskey that wanted to meet her. He said he wanted to get together with her and raise "seven stalwart sons." One time he went out to visit her and wanted to impress her and cut some firewood. As it turned out he cut up her skinning pole (this is a round pole that was used to skin coon, bobcat, or whatever she skinned) and that really made her mad and he went back to Cooskey, not to be heard of in Buckeye ever again.*

Becky mentioned that the hopeful suitor's name was Sargent. He had heard tales of this mountain woman and went out most hopefully to meet her. The pole he destroyed was a big, long, slick affair, coming to a rounded point. Bonnie turned the skins inside out on this pole to scrape them.

### **Weaver's Indian stories**

*Johnny Chambers asked Bonnie to move out to his property by 4-Mile Creek and do the lambing for him. I'm not sure what year this was. Mother used to ride her horse out to see her several times, and once I went with her just to ride out and back. One time when I was about 10 or 11, I rode our old horse Roanie out to see her. The route was down Conklin Creek Road to the swinging bridge, down the mouth of the river road to Wally's (Mathews) lower place, up by Cora (the Indian lady) Jackson Anderson's and up the trail over to Prosper Ridge and her cabin. She told me she was expecting Weaver (another Indian who lived up the gulch from Cora) to come over and they were going down to the ocean and fish, so we rode down the ridge to the ocean and camped there for the night. Weaver told old Indian tales for hours and kept a fire going all night, as there was an old Indian superstition about the werewolves that lived in 4-Mile Creek. I remember being kind of scared, but wanting to listen as he told such great stories, but I fell asleep.*

The route "down Conklin Creek Road" means downstream, of course, to cross near the present Lindley Bridge. Wally's lower place was where Roger Safier presently lives, and up by Cora's (she was Johnny Jack's daughter) and Weaver (Denman's) place means up through the Indian land near the old Indian cemetery, between Stansberry and Bear Creeks. According to the werewolf legend, these spooks from Four Mile Creek would jump on your back and make you carry them around as long as you could.

*In the morning Weaver and Bonnie had made pole fishing poles and fished off the rocks. They caught sea trout and gathered sea anemones (the ones that close up when touched) before riding back to the cabin later that afternoon. Weaver fixed the sea anemones and*

Bonnie cooked them and we had quite a wonderful dinner. I remember that they tasted like hotcakes. They must have been fixed something like abalone. Anyway it was quite different.

Another time Larry Hayden and I rode horses out to see Bonnie at Prosper. She wanted to show us another way to go home. We rode east from her cabin quite a ways. She asked us if we were ready for lunch. We stopped, got off the horses and Bonnie got a sack out of a tree and opened a can of something and we all had lunch there. We came down the long ridge east of Wally's lower place or across the gulch to the east from where we went up.

This was about 1946, before the "big road," as Becky puts it--the modern Lighthouse Road. The more easterly ridge that they took back down to the river was probably what we now call the Mathews Ranch Road, for they ended up down by the mouth of Mill Creek and the Ranch House.

Becky says that Bonnie could always dig up something to eat, because she had lots of places she stashed supplies. On the trip with Larry, she remembers Bonnie pulling a rope hanging from a tree, and a burlap sack of food fell down.

In the early 50s she was sick again and Georgia Chambers' sister Naomi took her to Crannell to stay with her. Mother and I went to see her one time and she was real sick. She died a short time later. Mother thought she may have had something like a gall bladder problem back when she was sick at our house and it turned into cancer.

Russell Cundiff was a big man and very funny. He loved to tease me. He came to our house many times. He also went to Alaska with Mother and Lloyd in 1951.

After my Mother died, I found a note that she wrote about Bonnie. It reads:

### **Liz Roberts' tribute**

"First met her in 1938. Lloyd took me out in the car to Tom Johnston's and we walked one mile to her place. She was up near the spring. She said, 'Please sit down on my nice green chesterfield,' which was the green grass under the trees. The grass out in the open was all brown and dry. She was a small woman, brown as a nut and had a smoked look to her from her camp fires. She wore her hair in a 'Dutch cut.' It was dark brown and thick. Always dressed in blue jeans and a shirt and 6" high men's shoes. She wore a size 2 or 3 shoe. I liked her from the first meeting. She became my best friend I ever had. We spent 18 years together. Some of the happiest of my life. She was tops. Whenever I felt blue or had the time from the ranch I saddled up my horse and took my gun and out to Bonnie's I would go.

We would just sit around her place and talk or we would just ride. She had a white horse she called 'Stormy.' We have ridden all over Buckeye, Island Mt., Rainbow, Vancourt, Peg-Leg, Prarigan, Brubaker's, and Fleming Orchard. Then out on Prosper, back end of Shaparel, down the Beach and stayed four days at the mouth of Four Mile. On one bear hunt across Four Mile where Gus Landergen and Charlie Roscoe had just killed a bear. What memories.

"She took care of my household while I went to the hospital to have Lloydene and stayed for several weeks after. Took care of all of us when I got my leg hurt and was in bed five and a half months. Many more things she has done for all of us. Never taking pay. Would never say 'Goodbye,' only 'I'll be back.' She would go out the door and pretty soon you would see her and her horse going up the road. One wonderful person.

"She had hunted with nearly all of the men of the valley. Just before Thanksgiving after I had met her and after many meetings, Lloyd went out hunting and saw her someplace out in the hills. She told him where there was a deer and as it was too late that night and he had chores to do he came home. The next day he went back and met her and got his deer. It rained hard and they got wet and she took him to an old cabin and got a blanket and told him to take off his wet clothes and wrap up in the blanket, which he did, and she dried his clothes. She had put on other dry clothes she had stashed there. She had blankets and food stashed in old deserted cabins and logs all over the hills. I had told Lloyd to invite her in for Thanksgiving. She had a few turkeys out there and they had gone wild. She brought one in for us. It was delicious, but the next morning after Lloyd had milked and ate breakfast she was uneasy as I noticed and finally she asked, 'Can I go down and water and care for Stormy?' 'Sure,' I said, 'why do you ask?' 'Well, Lloyd is down there too and I was afraid you might be jealous if I went down to the barn where he was.' I said, 'Bonnie, I am not jealous of anyone, never was and not of you. You and he spent two days alone out in the hills and you have known Lloyd for years so never ask again if you can go anywhere and anytime with him.'

"She spent a lot of time and worked here taking care of Lloyd's mother while she was alive.

"Then Bonnie would write a note and send it by someone coming in from out that way saying, 'Liz, come out and talk to me, I'm tired of seeing and talking to men.' She had a few hound dogs and a Sheppard. We really got acquainted and enjoyed each other's company a lot. When she came in she always stayed with us. The children all loved her and were so happy when she came."

Bonnie was not too into “town women,” and the things they talked about. Most of her buddies were male, as she lived a man’s sort of outdoor life. Her best women friends were Doris Loudermilk and Liz Roberts, both of whom loved to ride and to hunt. We are very fortunate that Mrs. Roberts, now deceased, wrote that page about Bonnie! Doris Johnston Clark Loudermilk is currently alive and well in Oregon. She says that she was very close to Bonnie, and that Bonnie probably had lots she could tell about her reasons for coming to the Mattole, but she didn’t say much about herself. Her past was a well-respected mystery.

Most people speculate that she had been in a failed love affair. One account says she was a secretary in love with her boss, a married man, and fled the doomed affair, swearing off romance and city life forever. Nowadays we might dare say perhaps she never was all that interested in men romantically, and the story was needed to cover what was seen as an uncomfortable gap in her life. But in those days they didn’t ask and didn’t tell; several people, including Doris, told me that personal reasons just weren’t the sort of thing you asked about. Especially in the Mattole Valley, where a hermit in the hills might be assumed to cherish her privacy.

### ***A.B.C. in Sonoma County***

Bonnie was born on August 20, 1899, in Napa or Sonoma County (no birth certificate was filed in either place). By the time of the 1900 census, she was the 10-month-old baby daughter of Christopher Hubert Cundiff, born in Virginia in 1860, and Mabel B. Cundiff, 14 years his junior, from Illinois. The Cundiffs seemed to have a good time with the census taker; while the government document is generally very dry and consistent reading material, listing household and family by number in a column down the left margin, an interruption in the orderly flow occurs next to the Cundiff listing. Instead of a number, the comment “In wagon camped on street” appears. And under Occupation, after scores of “Rancher,” “Poultry Farmer,” “Laborer,” or even “Unemployed,” Christopher Cundiff reports, “Farmer looking for a farm.”

And “Bernice” was not the name of the Cundiffs’ baby. I was confused, because Bonnie was definitely born on 8/20/1899, until I realized that Alpha B. would’ve been Alpha Bernice Cundiff. ABC!

Mr. Cundiff’s search for a farm paid off immediately; the 1926 History of Sonoma County, published by the S.J. Clarke Co., says that on July 10, 1900, he “bought sixty acres of land on the mountain above Bennett valley. Here he has developed a fine ranch and prosperity has crowned his efforts. He has fifteen acres of his land planted to orchard and ten to

vineyard, the remainder being devoted to hay and pasture.” The History goes on to relate that “In 1911 Mr. Cundiff was married to Miss Lena Arhns, a native of Illinois, and they have a son, Russell. By a former marriage, Mr. Cundiff is the father of a daughter, Bernice, and a son, Donald.”

By the time of the 1930 census, the family was listed in the Santa Rosa census, Matanzas district: Christopher, 69, a laborer in the fruit and poultry businesses; his wife Lena, 53, also listed as a poultry laborer; Donald, 23, laborer on a fruit farm; and Russell (actually William Russell), 16, a student. Bernice Cundiff appears a few residences down the list as a 30-year-old lodger, single, residing with an Earl and Margaret Sutherland, and employed as a “Rancher. Stock Ranch.”

I can’t find a date of death for Bonnie’s mother; perhaps her parents’ marriage ended in separation rather than untimely demise. At any rate, she was without her birth mother at an early age, and apparently her family revolved around her father and brothers. As Christopher’s eldest child, she was probably especially close to him, learning much about men’s work and ways.

### ***Becoming Buckeye Bonnie***

It’s said that Bonnie first travelled up here to the Valley when she was quite young; it was around 1920. For a decade she must have been back and forth between Santa Rosa and Humboldt County. Jim Cook says he remembers going south in a car with his family, around Ukiah (don’t picture the freeway, but the winding Redwood Highway), when they saw Bonnie riding along on her donkey, headed for Santa Rosa. The year would’ve been about 1930, he believes.

While her official residence in 1930 was in Sonoma County, Bonnie had filed a Homestead Claim in May, 1929, for the East Half of the SE ¼ and the Southwest Quarter of the SE ¼, Section Four, and the Northwest Quarter of the NE ¼ of Section Nine, T2s, R2W. This 160-acre piece was out east of the end of Conklin Creek Road, in the drainage of McGinnis Creek off the south side of Buckeye Mountain. It was pretty much surrounded by the holdings of Thomas Johnston, Doris Loudermilk’s father; that land later became Hap Stewart’s. By June of 1930 the homestead claim had been “established and duly consummated...” and Bonnie had a Buckeye home.

Horace Stewart, Hap’s father, helped her build her first cabin. Doris says it was a nice place where Bonnie planted different kinds of fruit trees, including one memorable big old fig tree. Becky Enberg remembers that Bonnie had a little garden and loved her flowers; she and Liz used to talk about flowers and share

gardening tips. Claude Richardson, who says he got much of his information from Doris Loudermilk, says Bonnie's was a nice little garden watered by a spring above the cabin. The cabin, according to Doris's son Jim Clark, was only a little 8' by 10' place, a log cabin (someone else mentioned), and was actually on Stewarts' land. But nobody paid much attention to property line details in those days.

While everybody agrees that Bonnie rode up to the Mattole Valley from Santa Rosa (on two black horses, one carrying her possessions), a few people say that she didn't ride thereafter. She walked all over the valley, with her dogs saddled up with cargo packs, and hunted on foot. She walked everywhere, and liked to go quietly and stealthily. Horses just would have slowed her down and been a hassle to move and care for.

There is some sense to this story, except that Doris rode with her personally many times, as did Liz Roberts. Perhaps toward the very end she let her horses go. But she always seemed to have dogs with her. The last dog Becky remembers was the shepherd named Tootie—Tootie Pooch is how Kyp Chambers remembers it. Lyn Chambers recalls Gophie, and Trish Stefanik mentions Kate. The canine friend who constantly accompanied Bonnie was named Tiny, according to Doris. Trish applies that name to a little shoat that Bonnie picked up and tamed, who later became the sole pig in her family of dogs.

Trish, who learned about Bonnie Buckeye from her good friend Russell Chambers, included in her monologue an account of Bonnie's shy generosity. She relates this story in Bonnie's "voice":

"I always liked to draw and paint with watercolors. And my friend Sarah she was good at it too, and we'd draw together and she'd use my paints, 'cause she didn't have any. So I decided to buy her a watercolor box—I got it mail order and had it sent di-rectly to her house—no message—and pretty soon here comes Sarah up the crick and she's all excited showin' me her new paint box---said it came in the mail and didn't say who from and did I know anything about it? Well, I couldn't say it was from me—I never was much good at tellin' my heart... so I said 'Well, Sarah, someone must like you a whole lot to send you that nice paint box...' She looked at me and smiled... never said a word."

Bonnie had also bought that autoharp for Becky. She seemed to have some family money, some kind of allotment. Perhaps her rare trips back down to Santa Rosa helped to keep the cash trickling in. At any rate, she did have a small nest egg at the end of her life. Obviously Bonnie cared very little for most store-bought

things. Art supplies would have been one of her permitted luxuries.

Doris says that Bonnie was quite an artist, who taught her a lot about drawing. She had some of Bonnie's work in her possession for years, but somewhere along the line it's gotten lost.

### *Losses in the mid-forties*

One of the stories that always comes up about Bonnie is the burning of her cabin at Buckeye. As you read above, Lloyd Roberts says that she did this to destroy all traces of the distemper that killed her beloved dogs. Doris's account, and Trish's too, is that Bonnie herself burned down her own cabin, and whatever meager possessions she had, along with her dead dogs—not only to wipe out the germs, but to wash away the sad memories.

Several people have hinted to me that there is more to the story than that. Another lost love may have been mourned. Or evidence of something fishy may have been purposefully destroyed. At any rate, they say that she never would have burned up her own home without a better reason than that given. I'm sure we will never know the answer to this one, and had better let sleeping dogs lie.

With no manmade structure for a dwelling, Bonnie took up residence in the hollow log mentioned by Becky. She stayed here for a couple of years, and had her dogs to keep her warm under the tarp. She must have been pretty accustomed to camping out, and sleeping in a log rather than a log cabin was probably not much of a hardship for her. She was "perfectly content" with her logs and stumps, Lyn says.

The destruction of her cabin was in the mid-1940s. Tommy Johnston, one of her very closest friends, died of a heart attack in 1944. According to Lyn Chambers, when Tommy Johnston died, everything changed. He was the one who held everything together out there on Buckeye. (Indeed, Johnston seems to have been a powerful character--after he died, Irving Chambers swore he saw him on the trail out there near Buckeye, and Tommy waved... it scared him, so much that he claimed it was an omen and he knew he was going to die soon. Irving never went back out there again. And he did indeed die within a year.) Irving's death meant another loss for Bonnie. Her father, Christopher, had also passed away, in February of 1945.

### *The cabin on Prosper*

Irving had been a stout friend. But his son, Johnny Chambers (Lyn and Kyp's father), was another good friend and support, and by 1946 he offered Bonnie some shepherding work out on Prosper Ridge.

Bonnie was a natural at her job. She was a little bitty woman, says Kyp, and very quiet. His dad said she was the best sheepherder he ever had. She could slip around and the sheep never knew she was there. “She was an awesome little lady,” Kyp says. “She had that uncanny ability with animals.”

Everybody mentions her petite size; perhaps it was more surprising in a woman who lived a “man’s life.” That and her pageboy haircut were her distinctive features. Kyp says the pageboy is what he’ll always remember about her looks. His sister, Lyn, says Bonnie bobbed her own hair with a pocket knife.



*Bonnie and canine friends at Prosper Ridge cabin*  
(Photo courtesy Becky Enberg)

When Bonnie first started working for Johnny, she was living in a hole in the ground—a little cabin, perhaps, but mostly defined by being dug back into the hill on the side of Prosper—and her circumstances appeared sketchy to some. Becky says they were a little worried about her out there; Bonnie was in her late forties by this time. Johnny Chambers and a few other men decided to build her a cabin (Wally Mathews was one of the others). They built on land they leased from the Mackeys. Johnny used to bring her food and supplies once she was established there. Lyn remembers that she had them bring aspirin for her friend Weavie (Weaver Denman). She also remembers visiting Bonnie up there on Prosper, and seeing all her seashell collections sitting around in glass jars.

Pete Bailey, a cousin of Kyp and Lyn’s, says he met Bonnie Buckeye in 1946 when she was working for Uncle Johnny on Prosper. “She called me Pistol Pete, and we hit it off immediately,” he recalls. “The very first time I ever saw her was when Uncle and I and Kyp went

in by horseback. I must have been about 13 at that time. Johnny was taking in some supplies. She was skinning a raccoon, and she joked, ‘Well, if you’re not going to bring me supplies I’d better trap some of my own.’”

There is some dispute as to whether Bonnie actually stayed in the cabin provided for her. According to Kyp, she never spent one night, but set up another place with a tarp (actually an old weather balloon she found on the beach) a couple of hundred feet away. Sonny Anderson owns the site of the old cabin, on which a sort of replica of the former structure has been built on the original footprint. It looks down over Four-Mile Creek, on a nice sunny (but steep) slope. Sonny had heard, from Johnny Chambers himself, that she only spent one night in the cabin. At any rate, she was in the area for several years, but in the early 1950s, she began to get sick again.

### *End of a short life*

Pete (who is the son of Georgia Chambers’ sister Naomi) says that she didn’t really know when it was time to go get some help. She was embarrassed to make work for others. Naomi Bailey said, “Why don’t you just come stay with us ’til you get on your feet,” and Bonnie went up to Crannell with them. Naomi ended up caring for her for the months before her death. The Baileys had a five-acre farm at Dow’s Prairie (Dow’s Prairie, and the old logging town of Crannell, are between McKinleyville and Trinidad). Since Bonnie didn’t like being a burden in the house, and they had the outdoor space for it, Naomi set her up in a trailer.

Pete very much enjoyed having Bonnie around. He says that she was highly educated, an amazing, delightful woman, with a wide breadth of knowledge. But despite all the loving care, Bonnie’s condition only worsened. Becky Enberg says that she went to visit her during this rough time, and it was bad—cancer had eaten a hole in her stomach.

Just about a week before her death, in September, 1954, Bonnie signed an agreement with Norman Quigley of Fortuna (Quigley & Cunningham) to sell all the merchantable fir timber on her Buckeye property. There was an odd stipulation in the contract prohibiting dogs or firearms on her place. And out of respect for her neighbors, I suppose, she included a stipulation that the buyer not remove the timber by any other than the Petrolia route.

Bonnie left 60 acres in Sonoma County to her brother Donald. (The original farm her father bought was 60 acres; it seems to have been in her name all that time. Perhaps to keep the brothers from squabbling, or because she really was the favored child.) Meaning for Doris’s sons to have her Buckeye land, she deeded to “Doris Loudermilk, Stranger,” three of the 40-acre

parcels in her 160-acre claim. Since the fourth is not mentioned elsewhere in her will, it was later added through some minor legal adjustments. Today, Bonnie Buckeye's place is Jim Clark (Doris's son's) land. The residue of her estate, which was considerable for those days and must have derived partly from the timber sale, went to the executrix of the will, Naomi Bailey.

Naomi was not a nurse, but she was apparently a very loving, caring woman. Bonnie called her "Little Bear." She was the one who brought her in to the Trinity Hospital, in Arcata, at the very end. Bonnie had been under the care of a physician since July, and on September 23, 1954, at the age of 55, she passed away. Her Death Certificate listed occupation as Rancher, and specified that the means of body removal was to be cremation.

### ***On being a Bonnie-wannabe***

Bonnie had no children, and neither of her brothers had offspring. Doris's or Liz's children would be the closest thing to surviving "relatives," and they have told me all they can.

But she did leave a legacy—the inspiration of a free, self-directed life. I have seen Trish's Bonnie Buckeye performed not only at the local Cabaret, but at the high school, by another talented and free-spirited woman, Brook Trout. Bonnie has become something of a Mattole cult figure. Everybody wants to have known her, and I notice that people are more passionate about their knowledge of her, and their version of how her life went, than they have been about other people I've researched. What is it about her that intrigues us? Was it that her knowledge of Nature, and of how to feed and shelter herself, even in the face of the threat of war or foreign invasion, made her more mobile, safer, and more independent than most of us? Or that her lifestyle represents a past that's rapidly disappearing?

I think many of us would like to live as Bonnie Buckeye lived. But the world has changed, and the Mattole Valley has changed a lot in fifty years. You can't traipse all over the country, leaving supplies and camps wherever you please. You can't build a cabin on somebody else's land without offering monetary compensation. You can't take a hike without trespassing on potentially hostile owners. Even on public land, you can't stay on one spot for more than fourteen days.

My idea of working Bonnie's example into my modern life is to try to live my own way, as self-sufficiently as possible, and try to be free from addictions to those things that only money can buy. If you are moved by her story, you will find your own lessons. That's what good heroes and heroines do—

inspire us to be more who we really are, rather than to be just like them.

Because nobody else can be Bonnie Buckeye.