

History Comes *Alive!*

~ Tales From the City Archives ~



by Hynda Rudd
City Archivist (Retired) and Club Member

The only known photo of William Wolfskill, taken Sept. 27, 1866. Photo courtesy Joan Hedding.



Wagons, Wine and William Wolfskill

Early LA settler and agronomist William Wolfskill was an agricultural pioneer.

From Hynda –

Hello, readers: Let me introduce you to this month's guest columnist, Conchita Marusich. The daughter of Elena Wolfskill, Conchita is writing a book on her great-great grandfather, William Wolfskill. If you haven't heard of him, consider this a delightful introduction to an important man.

Conchita's husband, Richard Marusich, worked in the Community Development Department for more than 20 years before his retirement from the City in 2010. Conchita and Richard have traveled across the country in pursuit of information about William Wolfskill. Enjoy!



Conchita and Richard Marusich

– Hynda

By Conchita Marusich

On Sept. 4, 1941, Elena Wolfskill, then 26, rode in a horse-drawn carriage from the San Gabriel Mission to downtown Los Angeles to commemorate the founding of El Pueblo de Los Angeles by Felipe de Neve in 1781. Selected as Queen of Los Angeles for the City's 160th birthday festivities, Elena participated in a prayer spoken to remember those 44 early settlers from Mexico who had left San Gabriel Mission in 1781 and headed toward the land that would eventually become the City of Los Angeles.

As the Queen of Los Angeles, Elena had been chosen for this honor because she was a descendant of a number of leading California pioneer families. Her great-grandfather was William Wolfskill, one of the leading citizens of early Los Angeles. Born in Boonesborough, Ky. in 1798, William grew up in Missouri and was on the second expedition that traveled over the Santa Fe Trail in 1822. Often referred to as one of the fathers of the Old Spanish Trail, William left Abiquiu, N.M. in September 1830, leading an expedition of 20 trappers. They were headed to California to trap beavers and then return to New Mexico. William arrived penniless in the Pueblo de Los Angeles in 1831 after

a long and dangerous six-month journey through parts of Colorado, Utah, Nevada and the Mojave Desert in California. At that time, the Pueblo de Los Angeles was a small Mexican town of adobe houses and mud streets, clustered around the main plaza with a population of around 1,000. Instead of returning to New Mexico, William decided to stay in the pueblo. In 1833, he acquired a small piece of land between present-day Spring and New High Streets where he could grow grapes and build a home near the main square of the town. William had two children with his common-law wife, Maria de la Luz Valencia. Wanting to expand his vineyard, in 1838 William acquired a plot of 100 acres in what would become the heart of today's downtown Los Angeles, stretching from present-day Alameda to San Pedro and Third Street to Ninth Street.

On the Wolfskill homestead, William built a large rectangular one-story adobe with walls three to four feet thick that kept the temperature inside cool in the summer and warm in the winter. Its many rooms opened onto the wide veranda that ran around the outside of the adobe where William could sit in the evening, looking out over his vineyard and orchard.

No longer living with his common-law wife, in 1841 William married Magdalena Lugo, who came from one of the leading families of Santa Barbara, and they had six children together.

In the Pueblo de Los Angeles, William continued planting citrus and fruit trees so that by 1862, his orchard contained two-thirds of all orange trees in the state of California. William's vineyards also grew in reputation as did his brandy (*aguardiente* in Spanish) and his wine. His son-in-law, H.D. Barrows, took a barrel of William's best port to President James Buchanan when Barrows went east on the steamship *California* in September 1857. By 1862, William had 85,000 vines in cultivation, making his vineyard one of the largest in the state.

In the 1860s, William acquired a number of large ranchos, including Rancho Santa Anita, which eventually became the current Los Angeles County Arboretum and Botanic Garden in Arcadia. In fact, William planted the first eucalyptus trees in California from some seeds given to him by Australian friends. Today visitors to the arboretum can see the 70-foot-tall "Wolfskill" Blue Gum Eucalyptus tree, reputed to be 140 years old, in front of the Queen Anne Cottage.

William bought Rancho Lomas de Santiago from Don Teodosio Yorba, paying \$7,000 for the 47,227-acre rancho in 1860. William hoped to graze cattle on the hilly land located north of present-day Irvine. But then the terrible drought years of 1863-64 hit and caused most rancheros to lose their cattle. Prior to the drought, cattle were selling as high as \$12 per

head, but by 1864, after two dry years, cattle were going for as little as 37 cents per head. Eyewitnesses reported seeing thousands of dead carcasses covering the land. William managed to save almost 75 percent of his cattle by moving them to the Mojave Desert, where there was water from the Mojave River and grass. But by March 1866, he decided to sell Rancho Lomas de Santiago for \$7,000, the same price he had paid six years before. Eventually, the land was sold to James Irvine, who incorporated it into his Irvine Ranch.

William Wolfskill, a giant in early California history, died Oct. 3, 1866. He is considered the founder of the California citrus industry as well as an important figure in the infancy of the wine industry in California. His spirit lives on through the Wolfskill descendants who are proud of their heritage.



Elena Wolfskill, Queen of Los Angeles, Sept. 4, 1941. Photo courtesy Conchita Marusich.

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