

The French Family: 100 Years in Ettersburg

Written by Sally French for the Buckeye Newsletter; Fall 2002

In 1898 or 1899 Edward and Sara French (ages 24 and 22) decided to leave Ferndale, where Ed was a butcher, for a homestead along the Mattole River. They came here about the same time as the Etter brothers and settled in the area that became known as Ettersburg. One reason for this move was because Sara had such a hard time with her asthma in the Ferndale climate. Sara's brother, Joe Pixton, came with them.



Sally and Richard French holding granddaughter Daphne- third and fifth generation ranchers.

Joe and Ed each took up homesteads. They first lived on the Pixton tract, just North of Ettersburg. We believe this house may have

burned. The next house was built on the French property around 1901 or 1902. This house was on the piece of property on which we now live. This first one-story home did not last many years before it burned down and a second house was built. It also burned down, and in the early thirties was replaced by the house we [Richard and Sally] live in today. [Editor's Note: Richard and Sally have since moved to a smaller house next door, and their daughter Joanna's family moved into the main house in 2016.]



Members of the French, Tosten and Sutherland families at camp in the 1920's.

Ed and Sara had four children-Sadie (Tosten) in 1896, Florence (Thomas) in 1898, Ralph in 1902, and Lee in 1906. Lee is 95 now and the only one of these children still living. The two homesteads were given to or inherited by the two sons. Ralph got the Pixton place and Lee, the French tract.

In the beginning, Sara and Ed's children went on horseback to a school built along the river near Grindstone Creek, on what is now part of our ranch property. By the time Lee was old enough to attend school they could walk because the school was under the Council Madrone (Big Madrone) tree, which was about 1/2 mile down the road. Lee attended school there through 8th grade, at which time he quit school to work with his father.

To support themselves, the French's worked on several different enterprises during these early years. One of the most unusual was their involvement in raising and milking goats for a cheese factory that was located in the Ettersburg Valley on what was then part of the Ericson place. The cheese (Roquefort) factory was in operation

for about 3 years, from 1923 to 1926. It was an incorporated business and had stock shares that sold for five dollars. Tosten, Sutterland, Snavelly, and several of the Etters, as well as Ed French, were part of this business. Even though the cheese was judged good, the business was not profitable enough to continue.

For a while the French's raised turkeys and pigs that were herded overland to Shelter Cove for shipment to San Francisco. Eventually they started raising sheep which proved to be the most profitable and continued until the mid 1980's. They cleared land for grazing, for themselves and others. Probably, the most lucrative work in the early days was the peeling of tanbark from the Tanoak trees. It was hauled by wagons with a team in the beginning years, and later by truck to Briceland to a tannic acid extracting plant that operated from 1901 to 1922. The extract was also shipped to Shelter Cove. After this plant closed, tanbark was hauled by truck to South Fork and shipped by rail to San Francisco and Santa Cruz. This work usually started mid-May and ended in mid- to late-July during the time the sap was up.



The French Ranch Homeplace in 1932. The house pictured was brand new- replacing the old home that burned down.

Lee married Mary Ziller in 1934. She was a school teacher who was raised in the Healdsburg area and completed teacher training at Humboldt Teachers Normal School in 1931. She came to the Ettersburg area to teach, where she lived with Albert and Catherine Etter and walked to the Wilder School that was on the Etter property. A new school was built around 1935 in its next and permanent location on what is now French property. It is at the mouth of Bear Creek along the Mattole River and the name was later changed to Ettersburg School. Mary was the first teacher to teach in this new school; she taught from 1931 to 1936 and then again from 1944 to 1950.



Lee French on his new D2 in 1949.

Besides working in the tanbark, Lee and his brother Ralph, were the first mail carriers in this area to use a vehicle to deliver mail. He and Ralph were also the first to take care of the county roads with a horse-drawn grader. When he started, it was a seasonal job on a road that didn't have much traffic, but he went on to be the county road foreman for all of Southern Humboldt. He worked at this job until he retired 35 years later.

Lee and Mary had one child, Richard, born in 1937. He attended school in Ettersburg, mostly taught by his mother, through 8th grade. Richard graduated from South Fork High School in 1955 and after graduation also worked for the county road

department for several years. I [Sally] came to Northern California in 1965 to teach school in Eureka. My parents bought land in Ettersburg bordering the French's ranch and this brought me in contact with the family.

After our marriage in 1968, Richard became self-employed, doing some logging and heavy equipment work as well as ranching. His mother, Mary, passed away in 1993 and Lee lived in a care home [until his death], leaving Richard and Sally the present owner-operators of the ranch.

The ranch, as it is today, grew in size by the same means as most other ranches. During the depression and WWII, life became so difficult on the homestead tracts that many people sold out and moved away. Lee and Mary French were more persevering. They worked hard and had some cash money coming in from Mary's teaching and Lee's enterprises, making it possible for them to acquire land as it came up for sale. The present ranch is about 3,000 acres, most of which is timbered. Only about one third, or less, is actually open land for grazing.

Most of our land was logged in the 1950s as soon as the timber acquired any value. The standing timber tax was just too heavy a burden on land that had timber and couldn't earn anything else by grazing stock. Until the mid 1980s we raised mostly sheep, but with the ideas prevalent today, and pressure to leave wild animals alone and have little or no predator controls, raising sheep is no longer feasible. Uncontrolled dogs are almost a bigger problem. We now raise more cattle, which only bring in enough money to pay property taxes. The rest of the ranch income is from timber operations. In order to keep this property, ranch income has always had to be supplemented by other work.

We have three children and hope to be able to pass this land to them much as it is today. We feel that this may be possible if at some time we can sell a conservation easement to the right to subdivide. The pressures on ranchers today make it ever harder to earn a living off the land. We would like to see this property that took so much effort to put together, be able to remain a large land holding for future generations. Open land tracts are becoming scarcer, and we feel that this would be a great loss to the environment, as well as to our family.

-Sally French, 2002