



### A TRIBUTE TO THE LIFE AND LEGACY TO KERN COUNTY OF GEORGE W. NICKEL JR. NOVEMBER 18, 1917-AUGUST 3, 2004

#### **GREAT-GRANDFATHER HENRY MILLER**

George's grandmother, Nellie Miller, was one of three children of Henry Miller, of Miller & Lux, who was known as the Cattle King. George was inspired by the recollections of his great-grandfather, Henry Miller, who was originally from Brackenheim, Germany and his real name was Keiser. He left Germany for the United States because of development opportunities and in 1847 he arrived in New York with about five dollars in his pocket. He accumulated a little initial income and became acquainted with a man by the name of Henry Miller who had purchased a ticket to San Francisco and had decided not to use it. So Henry Keiser bought his ticket and in order to use it, he assumed the name of Henry Miller. From that time on he went by Henry Miller and many years later the State of California officially changed his name to Henry Miller.

Miller worked as a butcher in San Francisco rather than going to the gold mines. In 1858 Miller formed a partnership with another butcher, Charles Lux. Under the name of Miller & Lux, the two men bought cattle and land. By the late 1880's Miller & Lux had acquired more than 1 million acres in California, Nevada and Oregon. Most of the land was in the San Joaquin Valley.

Lux died in 1887 and left his shares in the partnership to various family members. However, Miller slowly bought back Lux's shares. By 1905 he was the sole owner of the operation.

In his oral history, George Nickel recalled how his mother was also a great admirer of Henry Miller. She described to George how his great-grandfather always cared for the welfare of the people who worked for him and also fed hungry workers who might be temporarily unemployed. George stated in his oral history, "That story made such an impression on me that even as a five or six year old I would keep an eye out for any hungry-looking men who

might be passing along Floribunda Avenue. I even found two or three whom I brought home to give something to eat. Since they weren't employees of Henry Miller, my mother did have to tell me to be very careful to check them out first before bringing them home for something to eat."

#### **EARLY YEARS**

Born into a prominent family, George Nickel Jr., was the second of four children of parents George and Ernestine. George was born on November 18, 1917, a year after the death of his great-grandfather Henry Miller. Miller had left a prosperous business to his heirs but unfortunately it didn't stay prosperous in the hands of Miller's son-in-law James Leroy Nickel. After ten years the company's debt had escalated to \$28 million and to help pay this sum off the company started selling huge chunks of land.

Meanwhile, George was growing up in the Palo Alto area and spent most of his youth working the land of his great-grandfather as a common ranch hand. At the age of 22, after working his way through college, George graduated from the University of California, Berkeley with a degree in Letters, Arts and Sciences. While at college he met Charlotte Davidson and they were married in January of 1940.

After his graduation, Nickel moved to the Los Banos area to work the land he loved. He was appointed to oversee all of the agricultural engineering and development operations of the Miller & Lux, Inc. ranches which were still selling land. Through George's expertise and management, he was able to slow down the land sales and the family's debt was finally paid off in 1941. However, land sales continued and by 1954, the company's holdings were down to 45,000 acres. In 1954, Nickel and the six other Miller great-grandchildren sued to get control of the company. It was this same year that George suffered the tragic loss of his wife Charlotte and

---

brother after a plane crash. George was left to raise five children, along with fighting for control of the company. Nickel's efforts were at last successful when George's generation won control and the properties were divided among the great-grandchildren to develop as individual enterprises.

### **AGRICULTURE & REAL ESTATE DEVELOPMENT**

Nickel concentrated on the farming and ranching business. He lived in Merced County and managed land in Merced, Fresno and Kern Counties. Through George's research and ingenuity he developed the land-leveling program for Miller & Lux that improved his farming operation. Prior to that George had been successful with flood irrigation programs. In order to rapidly travel to all his ranches, Nickel learned to fly in 1950. It was during this time he would fly to Berkeley for business and he began to see Adele Rock Selfridge, a widow with three children. In George's oral history book, Adele remarked "That was pretty romantic, to have a date flying in, in those days." In 1955 George and Adele got married and together they raised their 8 children in Los Banos.

In addition to ranching Nickel also became involved in water issues and policy. From 1958 to 1966, Nickel served on the State Water Reclamation Board as Chairman of the Lower River Committee. He served in that position for eight years. Later he would head up a \$30 million dollar flood control operation on the San Joaquin River.

Before long, Nickel began branching out in the uses he found for land. His first project was developing land in the Los Banos area. There he built a 40-home subdivision. In 1965 he moved to Kern County and bought the 16,000 acre Olcese Ranch near the mouth of the Kern River Canyon. He renamed it Rio Bravo Ranch and later sold 6,000 acres of the grazing land, leaving the final 10,000 acres in the ranch. The year after he bought the ranch, George tried to donate a 320-acre site overlooking the river for what he hoped would become Cal State Bakersfield. But Nickel lost the bid to the Kern County Land Company, which later became Tenneco. George said in his oral history, "Although the loss of the State University was critical for me, I nevertheless promptly proceeded with development of portions of the 10,000 acre Rio Bravo Ranch."

Prior to the purchase of the Olcese family property, George was very active in the development of

Kern River water rights on his 16,000 acre Hacienda Ranch which lies south of Tulare Lake. George had learned that the 16,000 acre Hacienda Ranch had potential Kern River water rights under the Miller-Haggin Agreement of 1888. George made good use of this water position when the United State government was ready to settle the 535,000 acre-feet of storage in Isabella Reservoir on the Kern River. The decision granted George formal recognition of the Hacienda Water District and this ultimately led to George being able to negotiate his 20 percent storage in Isabella Reservoir.

"In addition to storage rights at Isabella Reservoir, I was also able to establish full Kern River water rights for the Hacienda Water District," said George in his oral history. "This was important because these became the water rights that I later moved on to the Olcese Water District to develop Rio Bravo and to use in the farming operation." Nickel eventually sold Hacienda Ranch but retained its water rights and transferred those rights to Rio Bravo. By storing the water in wet years he could sell it to other users during drier periods when the price went up. In 1975 he opened the plush Rio Bravo Resort. The facilities overlooking the Kern River and the manmade Lake Ming included a luxury lodge and dining room, swimming pool and 19 championship tennis courts. Eventually he added whitewater rafting, an equestrian center, condominiums and luxury homes along with an 18-hole championship golf course.

### **WATER BANKING**

In addition to real estate, George used his visionary talents in the area of water development and is responsible for what many believe is the first water banking project in Kern County and perhaps California. Through his expertise he encouraged the Buena Vista Water Storage District and the West Kern Water District to team up in 1978. Under the arrangement, the West Kern Water District diverted some of its water supply to land owned by the Buena Vista district west of Bakersfield where it could percolate and be stored in the natural underground basin. When West Kern needed the water, it could be pumped out and piped to Taft. Buena Vista was paid for the service but West Kern did not have to spend millions to buy land to store water. His ideas for water banking, where water is stored in wet years to use in dry years, led to the creation of the Kern Water

---

---

Bank, which is a world renowned storage operation.

### **HYDROELECTRIC PLANT – KERN RIVER**

George's visionary talents also extended to hydroelectric energy in the early 1980's when he built a hydroelectric plant on the Kern River. In his oral history, George discussed how he had observed that the Kern River drops rapidly from the mouth of the Kern River Canyon out of the Sierra Mountains so he developed a Project where there is 400 feet of drop from the mouth of the Kern River Canyon down to where he established the power plant. "It turned out to be a wonderful thing because I was able to build a concrete-lined canal from the mouth of the canyon down to the power plant," George said, "We got it built and it will handle 1,600 second feet of water, which is a lot of water for the power plant."

The Kern River was able to generate power but also controversy when in the early 1980's, George became upset with river rafters and others intruding on his property. Mr. Nickel erected a barbed-wire fence along his riverfront and had security people patrol it. A group of river activists sued and Nickel tried to end the controversy in 1983 by offering the public limited access to the river at one point on his property. But a Kern County Superior Court judge vetoed the offer, ruling the State law guaranteed wider access. In the end, a State Appeals Court upheld the Kern County judge's ruling which required George to grant a public easement along the bank of the river. The Kern River Parkway is an outgrowth of that ruling.

The Nickel family's remaining Old Hacienda water rights on the Kern River, which included excess water that flowed down the Kern River Canyon in flood years and the 20 percent share in the capacity of Isabella Lake, were sold to the Kern County Water Agency in 2001. The purchase brought the Nickel Family LLC a one-time payment of \$10 million, plus a guarantee of 10,000 acre-feet a year of imported water from the State Water Project that they can use or sell.

### **LATER YEARS & NICKEL'S LEGACY**

In addition to water, agriculture, and real estate development George also extended himself to the community by donating the land in the 1990's that allowed the development of Cesar Chavez School near

Mesa Marin Raceway. He was also very supportive of the California Living Museum, the soccer park and other local non profit organizations. Even when George's health started to decline after heart surgery in 1994 George continued to entertain socially and attend his Rotary Club meetings.

Even though George had suffered some financial setbacks in the 1980's, he still could point to the Rio Bravo Ranch as his most valuable property. The land includes about five miles of riverfront property from the mouth of the canyon to Lake Ming – some 9,000 acres of which 1,200 is farmed.

George, like his great-grandfather before him, has left a working and profitable legacy to his 16 grandchildren and 10 great grandchildren.

### **WATER STORAGE NAMED FOR NICKEL**

At the September 2004 board meeting, the Kern County Water Agency Board voted to name a large portion of the Kern River fan area of Bakersfield after George Nickel. The northern half of what is now known as the Pioneer Project will be renamed the George W. Nickel Jr. Kern River Spreading Works. The area encompasses roughly 1,000 acres north of the river bend on which water from the river and other sources is spread out and allowed to seep into the underground for storage.

The Pioneer Project, 2,300 acres north and south of the river bed, is part of some 30,000 acres in the Kern fan area used for spreading and banking water.

This article first appeared in the October 2004 issue of Water-Age published by the Kern County Water Agency and used with their permission.

*The following is from Kern County Water Agency General Manager, Tom Clark*

*"George has enriched us all with his vision and creativity and he has left Kern County a much better place than when he arrived. I feel very fortunate that George was my mentor and friend.*

---