

George Homer Bodfish
By
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Who is or what is a Bodfish? If you have spent any time in Gilroy, I am certain you have heard the name of Bodfish at least once. In the late 1860s there was a growing community in the southern end of the Santa Clara County to be finally incorporated as the Town of Gilroy in 1868. In this town there was a road named Bodfish Street as well a road coming out of the growing town area heading west over the mountains to the Santa Cruz County Line known as Bodfish Mill Road (or some just Mill Road). Today the name Bodfish is still heard in these mountains as there is a small creek named Bodfish Creek which runs along the south side of Hecker Pass Highway. In 1868, shortly after the Town of Gilroy became incorporated, several of the streets in the town were renamed and on April 14, 1868 the Gilroy Town Trustees enacted Ordinance Number 7 which was to rename once was known as Bodfish Street to Fourth Street as part of the renaming of all East to West running streets into numbered streets. But who was Bodfish who was one of the oldest names that surrounds the origin of the Town of Gilroy?

On January 2nd, 1820 in Barnstable County, Massachusetts the fourth of nine children born to Ebenezer and Nancy Bodfish named George Homer came into this world. The George H. Bodfish lineage was a very rich one. He was the descendant of the first puritan settlers in Massachusetts as well on his mother's side, was related to Cecilus Calvert, who had founded the state of Maryland as well became the first to establish political and religious freedom in America. The Bodfish lineage has also been traced back as far as the 13th Century in England.

George grew up on a farm helping the family but was not very happy with the prospect of following in his father's legacy of being a farmer. George had fallen in love with modern technology and had a very deep passion for mechanics and milling. Sometime in his twenties, George grew tired of the life on the farm and left to pursue his own dreams. George ended up in New Bedford, Massachusetts where he began a very successful career in lumbering as well shipping cargo.

In 1849, George sailed traveling around the Cape Horn and finally made it to his destination of San Francisco. George fell in love with the city and the excitement of the growth on the West Coast as well seen the fever of the Gold Rush. Later that year George returned to Massachusetts and continued on in his career always remembering the trip he made to the exotic and intoxicating new frontier. Shortly thereafter, George met the person who would forever change his life. He met a wonderful widow who had recently travelled to New Bedford with her son from Macon, Georgia. Sarah A. Brent was a daughter of the Honorable William M. Brent who had a quite successful career as a prominent lawyer and congressman who represented the State of Louisiana in the United States Congress. Her late husband was a jeweler who was a native from Martha's Vineyard. A short couple years later, George and Sarah soon felt the next course of their relationship was due, and so in 1851 in New Bedford they were married.

George never forgot his passion of San Francisco, and soon the three of them, George, Sara and her son, Allen, set sail to San Francisco passing through Panama. Upon arriving to San Francisco, George was able to secure a stake and began farming south of San Francisco in what is known today as Santa Clara. They both knew this was the land to start anew and to grow their own family. There the two

had three more children, Emma (born on March 9, 1855), George Fenwick (born on February 1, 1859) and Jessen (born on May 26, 1861).

George farmed in the Santa Clara Valley near San Jose and soon established one of San Jose's first mercantile businesses. George H. Bodfish became a well respected member of the newly growing community in San Jose and continued to express his passion in modern technology. On October 12, 1853 George sent the first message over the SF&SJ Telegraph as well in 1855 he introduced the first steam threshing machine to the region, which was a steam powered farming machine that removes seeds from the stalks and husks.

Farming was good, and George sought additional land for farming as well venturing into new business and laid stake on a large piece of property nestled in the mountain range between Watsonville and Gilroy. The family relocated and settled into the area and Bodfish family spent time between San Jose and Monterey where the children were educated.

In 1853, George with the assistance of his brother Orlando established a lumber mill in the San Jose area and eventually bought additional land from an area known as the French Redwoods, an area of land between Gilroy and in what today is known as Hecker Pass east of where the family farmed in what is known as Bodfish Canyon. Logging technology was relatively primitive at the time, where milling was done in huge sawpits and trees were cut with manual labor. After building the mill in the French Redwoods, George added a steam engine where he was able to produce up to twenty-five thousand feet per day as compared to the San Jose mill only producing five thousand feet per day under normal manual means.

George became more and more involved with the building of the ever growing County and was involved in numerous projects. In 1859, George donated 3,641 feet of lumber to the Santa Clara Agriculture Society in order to construct the Santa Clara County Fairgrounds. In 1860, George became one of the officers for the newly founded Western Pacific Railroad and in 1862, George was one of the signers to allow the construction of a rail line connecting San Francisco to Sacramento.

Business was booming for George. The Bodfish Mills was thriving and needed expansion, which George did by purchasing land and a piece of the milling business from William Hanna in 1862 in the French Redwoods expanding on his current holdings. At the time, Bodfish Mills was providing most of the lumber to all the homes and businesses being erected in Gilroy as well delivering by oxen and wagons to areas further out such as San Juan Bautista and Monterey.

In 1851, gold was first discovered in the area known today as Kern County in Greenhorn Gulch near the Kern River. Major mining operations began in the area began in 1852 at the Keyes and Mammoth mines. 1853 brought considerable amount of claims and strikes for gold along the Kern River. More and more prospectors kept coming to the area and looking for additional strikes. In 1860, gold-bearing veins were found to contain quartz and a new boom had started to occur. In 1863, George was fascinated with the stories rolling into the town as well what was reported in the papers and he soon took his own trip out to an area at the time known as El Dorado Camp (to be renamed Sageland in 1866) and had his own try at prospecting.

George had returned home, but gold fever had already set in. Finally, in 1867 after a few more trips back to Kern County he made a major decision for himself and his family. George decided he

wanted to become a fulltime miner. George sold the Bodfish Mill to William Hanna and packed up wagons moved to the Sageland area. George settled into the Kern River Valley and worked at one the local mines mining for quartz and gold. He did eventually established his own gold mine near Keyesville. Mining life was harsh and lots of hard work as these were mainly placer or sluice mines.

1868 was an extremely rough year. Orlando, George's brother who had also chased the gold fever and had a lot of personal issues in failed business as well alcoholism, passed away by suicide where he cut his own throat in the small town of Havilah (about 5 miles south from where George was mining). Orlando at one time a quite wealthy and prosperous man, had lost everything. Also, the youngest of George's children, Jessen passed away suddenly at the age of 7. The very next Spring while George was mining, he too passed away surprisingly on May 9th at the age of 48.

George was a very respected and liked man. He was often described as a lively individually who brought a smile to most folks he met. His short time in Kern County was shortly commemorated as the small growing mining community near where George passed away was named after him. The town of Bodfish is still thriving today with over two thousand residents.

His surviving children, Emma, George Fenwick and Allen all went on with their lives. George Fenwick was married in 1884 to Brenda, daughter of the Honorable J.B. Prague of New Orleans, Louisiana. George F. spent many years working as a dealer in stock as well as horses in the Monterey area, where his stock grazed upon the current 17-Mile Drive. George F. and Brenda resided in Pacific Grove and raised two sons. Brenda with her love of family also had a taste for literature and wrote several articles for the San Francisco and Monterey papers. Emma settled down and married W.H. Lambert in Monterey and quietly raised their own family. Allen Luce, became a leading citizen for Pacific Grove. Allen received a liberal education in San Jose and Monterey, following on into mercantile business first in Kernville, followed by Havilah and then White Pine. Allen tried his luck at mining as well throughout Kern County and in Nevada, but then moved to Gilroy as well Hollister for a short period before finally settling in the area now known as Pacific Grove where he was not just a primary contributor to its growth but was the Point Pinos lighthouse keeper for 22 years. Allen married in 1875 to Fannie Perry, daughter of Captain Richard Perry of San Felipe. Allen and Fannie had two sons and a daughter who passed away at the age of three.