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**Citrus Roots – Preserving Citrus Heritage Foundation**  
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The views of the writer may not be the same as this foundation.

## Preserving Citrus Heritage Foundation

# The Life of William Wolfskill, Part I

Judy Gauntt Liebeck

**W**illiam Wolfskill, a contemporary of Don José Andrés Sepulveda, was one of the outstanding pioneers of California's wine industry. Wolfskill also was a cultivator of tropical and domestic fruits, the founder of the commercial orange industry, and is credited with having introduced large-scale lima bean culture to the Los Angeles area.

Wolfskill was a man of great adventure. His family had been a neighbor of Daniel Boone in North Carolina, but moved to Missouri in 1809 when William was ten years of age. There young Wolfskill learned about fighting Indians, and emerged from his youth well-skilled in the arts of hunting, trapping, plowing, planting, and raising livestock. At age 23, he set out to seek his fortune in the rapidly expanding fur trade in the southwest.

During the next few years, Wolfskill trapped, fought Indians, drove herds of mules for hundreds of miles, became a merchant and a trader, and led expeditions. On Wolfskill's first expedition to

the Far West in 1830, he discovered what would become the most famous route from Taos, New Mexico to California – the Old Spanish Trail.

Wolfskill first arrived in Los Angeles in February 1831. He visited the head priest at the Mission San Gabriel, Father Jose Bernardo Sanchez, who told Wolfskill and his partner that “their scrupulous honesty had preceded them there.” Wolfskill decided to stay in California for a year and hunt sea otters along the coast. The venture was not entirely satisfactory.

On September 21, 1833, Wolfskill presented naturalization papers to the alcalde (mayor) of Los Angeles as an indication of his intention to remain in the pueblo. Sometime that year, he bought a small tract of land containing some grape vines and settled down, one of the first white settlers in the area.

Wolfskill entered into a common-law marriage with Maria de la Luz Valencia, daughter of Ignacio Valencia and Maria Luisa Varela de Valencia. A daughter was born in 1833, and the next year a son.



**Map of Old Spanish Trail. Barker Collection.**



**1. Los Angeles Plaza as it was during Wolfskill's days (circa 1860).** *Courtesy of the A. Allen Collection.* **2. The adobe home of William Wolfskill completed in 1839.** *Courtesy of the Huntington Collection.* **3. William Wolfskill.** *From the album of Joan Hedding.* **4. First map of Los Angeles dated Aug. 29, 1849, drawn by Ord.** *Courtesy of Sherman Library and Gardens.* **5. Joan Hedding, great-great-granddaughter of William Wolfskill, standing next to the Wolfskill family clock (8-day clock).** *Courtesy of Joan Hedding.*

To support his family, Wolfskill began building houses, fences, digging wells – anything he was commissioned to do. He built the now-famous adobe on Calle Principal. It served as headquarters for Governor Pio Pico when Los Angeles was temporarily made the capital of Alta California in 1845 and as headquarters for the American occupation forces under Captain Archibald H. Gillespie during the Mexican War. Later, after considerable remodeling, the adobe was turned into the Bella Union Hotel, the finest hotel south of San Francisco.

The first official district census, taken in 1836, listed 1,675 non-Indian residents, 553 Indians living in rancherias, and 55 foreigners (29 Americans, the remainder Europeans). In Los Angeles, the census count indicated a total of 603 men, 421 women and 651 children. Wolfskill was listed as Esten Guillermo Wolfskil, age 38, property owner and laborer, married and a native of the United States. His name was followed by Luz Valencia, 30, Juan Je (Timoteo) Wolfskil, 1, and Suzanne Wolfskil, 2.

Wolfskill continued to acquire more land and to plant more vines to enlarge his vineyard. He experimented with different methods of planting grape vines. He also studied the possibilities of distilling grape brandy, and investigated means for the commercial production of wine.

While Wolfskill spent much of his time with his vines, Luz spent time with a neighbor, Francisco Araujo, a local silversmith of questionable character who was exiled from California in 1837. Luz left her husband and children to go with Araujo, who was later killed in a duel.

The following year, Wolfskill traded his small vineyard for a 100-acre parcel that became the site of his permanent residence. At the time of the exchange, the parcel contained several thousand grape vines and a small number of fruit trees. Wolfskill's brother John came to live with him, and they immediately began to make improvements to the land. Rows of newly-set grape vines soon replaced open fields. Between 1838 and 1846, Wolfskill planted 32,000 new vines and became one of the leading vineyardists in the county.

In 1839, Wolfskill completed a large adobe house on the property, one of the most dignified, well-furnished homes of early Los Angeles. A hand-carved cherrywood four-poster bed and a Chickerling grand piano were shipped around Cape Horn for the house. By 1840,

Wolfskill was a well-established yanqui in the pueblo of Los Angeles.

Wolfskill was welcome in all the best homes. In 1840, his old friend, Don Antonio Maria Lugo, introduced Wolfskill to his niece Magdalena who was visiting Los Angeles. Doña Maria Magdalena Lugo was the daughter of Don José Ygnacio Lugo and Doña Rafaela Romero de Lugo of Santa Barbara. The Lugo family was among the oldest and most prominent of the Spanish California residents. Magdalena's father, son of Francisco Salvador de Lugo, was the second native child of Spanish extraction to be born in California. He was confirmed by Father Junipero Serra at Mission San Antonio de Padua in 1778. Magdalena's uncle, Antonio Maria Lugo, received one of the few land grants made during the Spanish period. His Rancho San Antonio, granted in 1810, consisted of 30,000 acres adjoining the pueblo of Los Angeles on the southeast.

Magdalena and William were married on January 12, 1841. They had six children, but one daughter died at age four. The other children all remained in California and became influential members of the community, as did Wolfskill's children from his previous marriage.



William and Magdalena's five young adults (left to right), Juana, Jose, Magdalena, Francisca, and Luis. Courtesy of Joan Hedding.

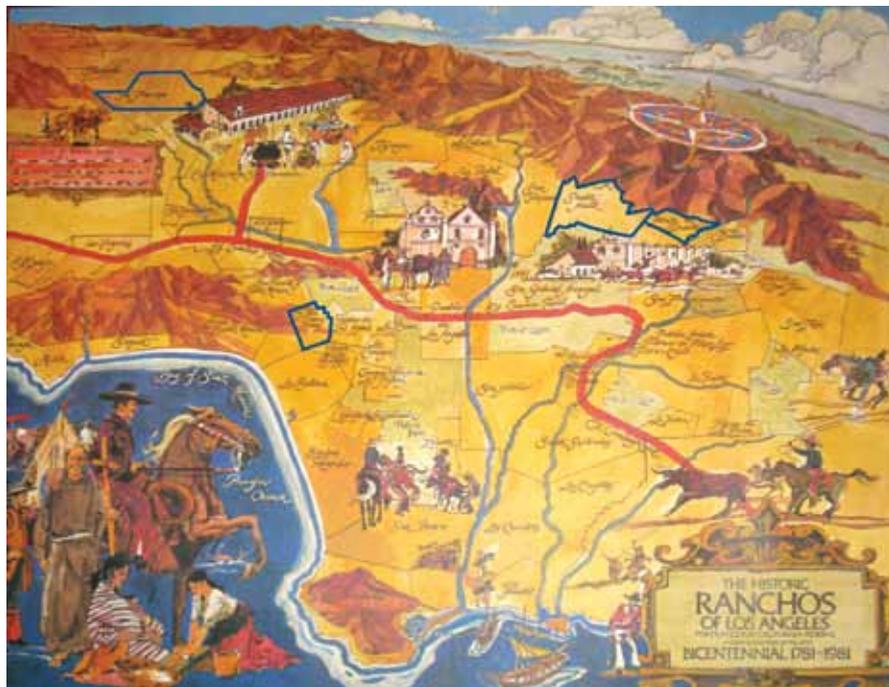
In time, the Wolfskill family would own, within what is now Los Angeles County, the following: Rancho Azusa de Duarte (6,500 acres), Rancho Santa Anita (9,000 to 10,000 acres), Rancho San Jose de Buenos Ayres (presently Westwood), and a portion of Rancho San Francisco (which yielded important oil reserves and is today the Newhall area).

In Orange County, the family had held Rancho Lomas de Santiago and a "share" of the Rancho Santiago de Santa Ana. Further, in other areas, they owned Rincon del Diablo (aka "Wolfskill Plains" [presently Escondido]), and Rancho Rio de los Putos (17,754 acres) acquired in 1842 and managed by Wolfskill's brother John (much of this property was later given to the University of California at Davis).

**Editor's Note:** Part II, "William Wolfskill founds the California citrus industry," will pick up Wolfskill's life story from the time he planted the first trees of what would soon become his famous orange groves.

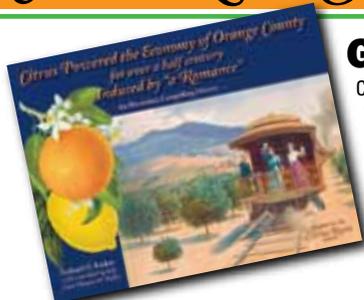
*Judy Gauntt Liebeck has written extensively on the Irvine Ranch. Together with the Irvine Historical Society, she led the effort to save many historic buildings throughout the Ranch. Her friendship with Joan Hedding, William Wolfskill's great-great-granddaughter, led to a special interest regarding Wolfskill's many contributions to California history that have long been buried in historic archives.*

*Illustrations provided by Richard Barker, Citrus Roots—Preserving Citrus Heritage Foundation. ●*



Map of Ranchos of Los Angeles County, with Wolfskill areas outlined in dark blue. Barker Collection.

## Citrus Roots Series...

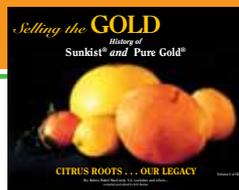


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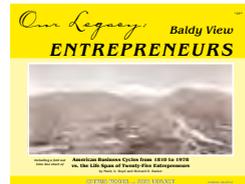
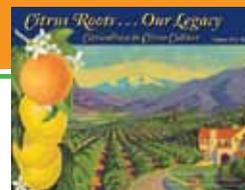
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