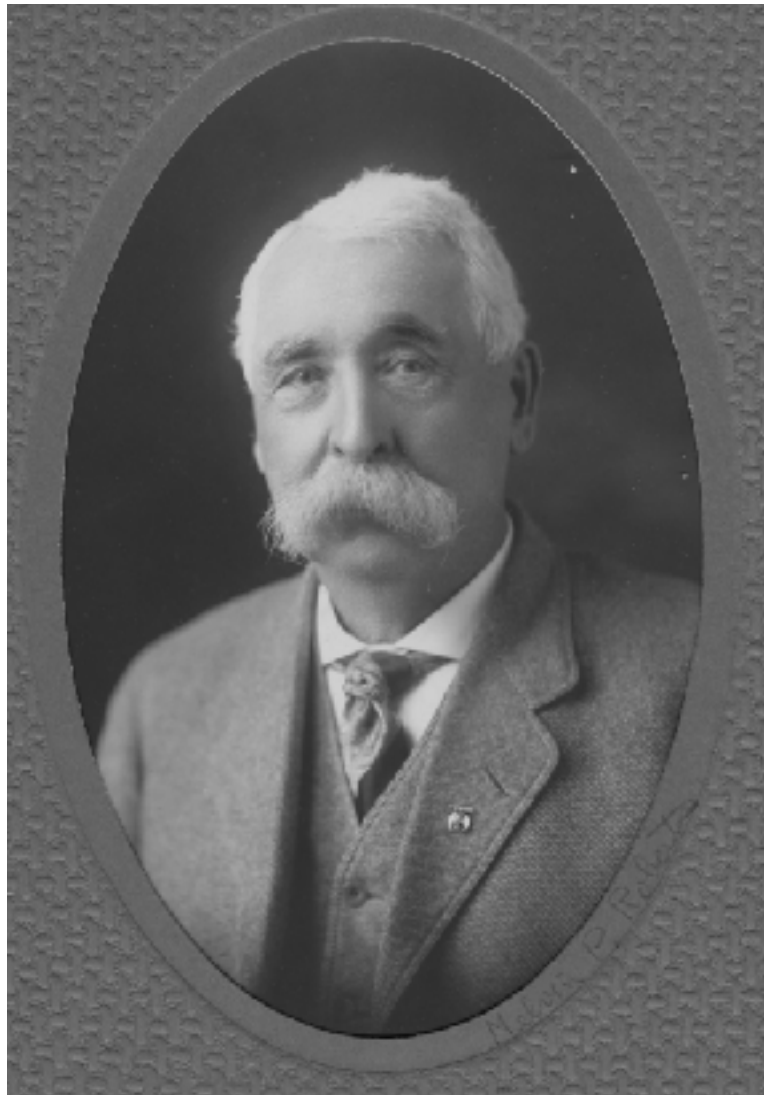

Melvin Parker Roberts

April 21,1842 — January 15,1926

Prepared by Glenn C. Hoyle, April 2017 (Reviewed September 2019)



Melvin Parker Roberts

Melvin Parker Roberts (Known as Mel, or MP) was born April 21, 1842 in St. Albans, Somerset county, Maine. After receiving a “scanty” education he came to California at the age of 19. He entered Humboldt County in 1860 and engaged in the lumber and stock business. In 1882 he founded the first commercial dairy in in Humboldt County. In 1887 he married May Lavis Nelson, the daughter of another well-known pioneer family. They went on to have three children, Frederica Atlant, Mel Jr, and Hazel. Between 1901-1909 he represented the Second Assembly District in the California State Legislature, and afterward became involved in local politics. He died on January 15, 1926 and is buried in Greenwood cemetery in Arcata alongside his wife, May Lavis Nelson (1867-1933)

Parents

MP’s parents were Joseph P. Roberts and Atlant Ireland. **Joseph Parker Roberts** was born on Jun 11 1817 in Pejepscot, Sagadahoc, Maine. He died on Nov 19 1901 in Caribou, Aroostook, Maine. He married **Atlant Alicia Ireland**, daughter of Joseph Ireland and Olive Moore on Aug 27 1838 in St. Albans, Somerset Co., Maine. She was born in May 1820 in St. Albans, ME. She died on Sep 09 1892 in Caribou, Aroostook, Maine.

Joseph P Roberts was a Baptist minister, who also farmed in order to support his ministry. Together with his wife, Atlant, they had 10 children. MP Roberts was the second child, and the oldest son. MP’s mother, Atlant was the youngest of five daughters of Captain Joseph Ireland.

The Roberts book describes Atlant: *“She was brought up on a farm and taught to do all kinds of work appertaining to a farmer’s household. Her father always had a large herd of cows, large flocks of sheep and plenty of horses. She could spin and weave, drive horses or ride horse-back. She was of medium size with a florid complexion, full of life and animation, of a social disposition; which traits were marked to her last days.”*

Additional details of MP’s parents, siblings and ancestors are found in the Roberts Book.¹ Other details in this history are sourced from this book.

Childhood and Early Career

Because Melvin was an important local figure, and early pioneer, the facts of his life have been well established. His early life was spent on a farm. Not much is known about

¹ "History of Joseph P. and Atlant Roberts, Their Children, Grandchildren, and Friends" (Written in 1893 by Melvin's father Joseph P. Roberts)

his education outside of the observation that he had “received only a scanty education, but in spite of this grew to be very successful.”² Another source notes that he attended the public schools and later St. Albans Academy, during the spare moments when he was not assisting his father with “the labors of the farm.” (Anyone who has grown up on a farm will appreciate this nuances of this understatement.)

There is conflicting information about Melvin's birth year: The book "History of Joseph P. and Atlant Roberts, Their Children, Grandchildren, and Friends" (by Melvin's father Joseph P. Roberts) says that Melvin was born April 21, 1840. The information from True Hoyle says he was born in 1841, which matches the dates given in sources such as the History of Humboldt County California. The date of his birth is listed as 1842 on his grave in Greenwood Cemetery.

As a young man, Melvin decided to go to California to try his luck in the gold fields. He settled his parents in Fort Fairfield, Maine, sold his assets for two gold pieces, and then traveled to New York City, where he caught a ship headed to California. From New York to Panama he was on the Northern Light, and from Panama to San Francisco on the Uncle Sam.³

Mail service to California was established in 1848 by the USPS. Mail traveled from the east coast via Panama⁴.



At the isthmus of Panama, Melvin and the other ship passengers had to travel by railroad to reach the Pacific Ocean because the Panama Canal was not yet built. (The railroad was completed in 1855; before that passengers had to take wagons, horses, or mules across the isthmus.) The land the train traveled over was hot, humid and swampy, and Melvin caught malaria during the 47-mile trip. When he arrived in San Francisco, he headed up to the gold fields in the Central Valley.

Melvin soon grew discouraged with gold

² Memories of True Dolson Hoyle, his granddaughter.

³ History of Humboldt County by Leigh H. Irvine: Historic Record Co. Los Angeles, CA 1915, pg. 238.

⁴ <https://about.usps.com/who-we-are/postal-history/overland-mail.htm>

mining, and took up agricultural work in the fields near Chico, California. During this time, he heard about the plentiful land and timber in Humboldt County, California. He decided to travel to Humboldt County to see if it would be a place of opportunity for him. Melvin returned to San Francisco, where he caught a ship to Humboldt County.

In 1860, at the age of 19, Melvin "crossed the bar" (the sand bar) outside the Eureka harbor to land in Humboldt County. He sailed in the old steamer Columbia, a side wheel passenger steamer. This was the most difficult sand-bar crossing of all his many trips to and from Humboldt County. No jettys were built at this time, and there were numerous shipwrecks in the Eureka harbor area.

An instance of the dangers is the wreck of the SS Northerner. The ship hit a submerged rock and wrecked January 6, 1860 on Centerville Beach, California, a few miles south of the entrance to Humboldt Bay. Thirty-eight people died: Seventy others made their way through crashing surf to shore. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SS_Northerner

Melvin worked as a logging contractor, running logs to the mills, and followed other logging and mining ventures for 20 years. Part of this time he worked for himself, as did most loggers in those days. According to True Hoyle, *"He always said, 'owning a piece of land is like having a bank account.'"* He bought and sold various pieces, among them the Benbow Inn site below Garberville and the Big Bend Ranch on Mad River.



Above is the location of the Big Bend Ranch on the Mad River and a picture of the Big Bend taken by True Hoyle about 1930 while she was on a pack train trip with her high schools friends.

True also states that, when Melvin lived at the Mad River, he used to water his horse in the Mad River. Years later the Indians in the area told him they were going to ambush

him, but he was never attacked because of his fearlessness. His body language said he wasn't afraid, and the Indians respected that. He got along with the Indians very well.

His first marriage was to Chasten Page on January 23, 1868.⁵ That summer, Melvin made a trip back to Maine for a family reunion. Excerpts from the Roberts book tell part of his story: *"Our children were all home during the summer of 1868. It was wonderful we were all spared to meet again. Melvin returned to California that fall....Soon after Melvin's return to California he lost his wife.... His first wife left one son....he remained single sixteen years when he married again."*

It is also interesting to note that Mel's trip back east in 1868 represented his second time he navigated the Panama canal in transit. When the transcontinental railroad was completed in 1869 it shorted the transit considerably.

Best estimates are that Melvin's first wife died in childbirth in March 1871. They had one son, Bertram who was raised by Melvin's brother Charles in Eureka. Bertram was a grown young man when Mel married again.

MP Roberts circa 1911.

There has been controversy over whether Bertram was actually Melvin's son. Atlant Roberts, Melvin's daughter, believed that Mel befriended and married his first wife when she was already pregnant by another man. But, according to Martha Wayne (True's sister), *"There apparently was much guilt felt by Melvin about the death of his wife. There was also further scandal about Bert because he was a "ner-do-well", did not support his wife and child and she divorced him. The record however does not seem to bear out the theory of a "shot-gun" marriage and "no blood relationship."*⁶

Another item which supports the position that Bertram was Melvin's son, was that Mel's will left property to two sons.



⁵ Details of his first marriage and son are documented in a letter to True Hoyle by Martha Wayne, May 16, 1982.

⁶ Letter to True

Livestock and Dairy Farms

It wasn't until 1880 that Melvin turned his attention to farming and raising sheep and stock on his ranch on the Mad River at Three Cabins. At one time he had 9,000 sheep in his corral. Melvin also bought and sold timber land and real estate.

In 1882, Melvin purchased the 80-acre Wiley farm on Daniel's Slough near Arcata and started a dairy. He was one of the first people to see the potential of dairying in this area, and was the first man to operate a dairy in the Arcata area. He delivered milk from house to house in three- gallon cans. His milk delivery efforts meant that each family didn't have to have its own milch cow and didn't have to fence their yard to keep out the cows (cows used to graze on the Arcata Plaza). In the process of dairying, Melvin also demonstrated that he could successfully grow red clover in the Arcata bottoms area.

Mel owned property near the Arcata Methodist Church on 11th Street , where in 1882 he had started Arcata's first commercial dairy. In the Fall of 1887, (The same year he remarried.) Melvin purchased the Phillips / Stokes farm⁷ (197 acres) to increase the size of his dairy. Also In 1887 Mel brought property at the foot of Fickle Hill Road, eventually moving his dairy there. The hay barn and house had already been built. In the late 1890's, Melvin added another 30 acres to the farm. In 1901 he had the dairy and barn updated to be state of the art for that time. The remodeled barn became the Dolson barn when it was moved at the time of the property division in 1935.

In about 1897-98 a creamery association was formed and a creamery built on the corner between Alliance Corners and Janes Creek School, now Pacific Union School. Mel was on the board along with John Gray Dolson⁸.

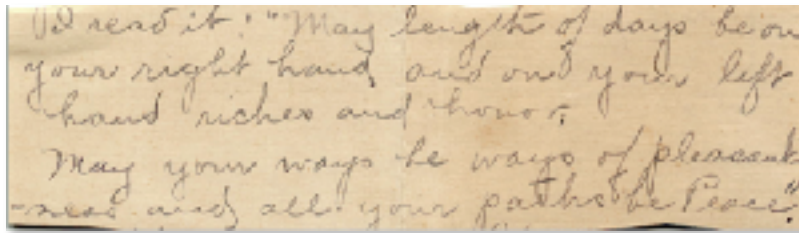


⁷ The Phillips house, one of the oldest houses in Arcata, is considered to be one of Arcata's best examples of Greek Revival architecture in Arcata. (For more information on the Phillips House and ranch, see their website).

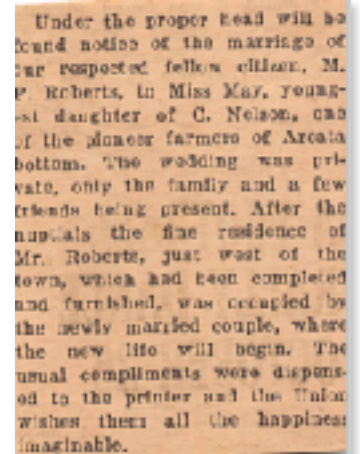
⁸ True notes that she had no personal memories of her other grandfather, John Gray Dolson.

Marriage and Family

Melvin married **May Lavis Nelson**, his second wife, September 3, 1887. (He was more than 25 years older than her which was not unusual in those days.) Melvin and May had three children, Atlant, Melvin, Jr., and Hazel May. All three of his children were born in the Phillips house. Again, the Roberts book (1893) adds some details: *"Melvin P. when he first went to California carried on the lumbering business. Then run a sheep ranch in company with his brother Calvin P. Sold out and bought a farm in Arcata, where he now lives. He runs a dairy of fifty cows."*



Oh read it! "May length of days be on
your right hand, and on your left
hand riches and honor.
May your ways be ways of pleasant-
ness, and all your paths be peace!"

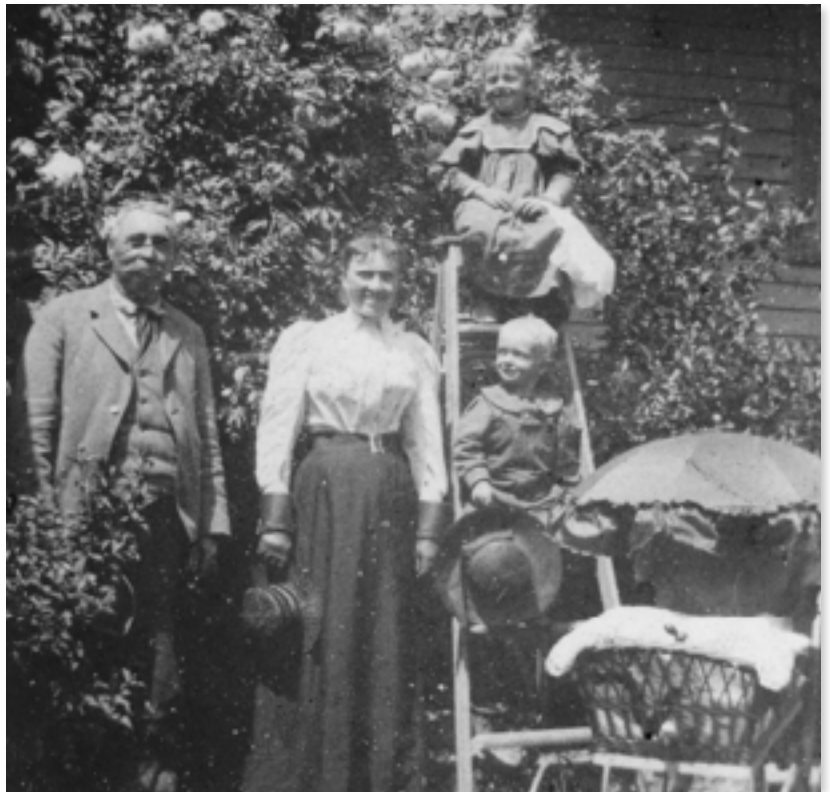


Under the proper head will be found notice of the marriage of our respected fellow citizen, M. P. Roberts, to Miss May, youngest daughter of C. Nelson, one of the pioneer farmers of Arcata bottoms. The wedding was private, only the family and a few friends being present. After the nuptials the fine residence of Mr. Roberts, just west of the town, which had been completed and furnished, was occupied by the newly married couple, where the new life will begin. The usual compliments were dispensed to the printer and the Union wishes them all the happiness imaginable.

Above, wedding notice and a snippet from Mel and May's wedding vows.

At right, Melvin Parker Roberts and May Lavis Nelson at the Phillips house, 1897. Atlant is at the top of the ladder, Mel Jr., and Hazel May is in the crib.

May Lavis Nelson was the daughter of **Christian Nelson** (1822-1896), a Danish sea captain who came to Humboldt County in a sailing vessel through the only open harbor, Trinidad Bay. he had sent money to his future wife, **Augusta Fredericka Bayreuther** (1832-1916) in Germany to come marry him in California. Accepting his offer, she had taken a ship which traveled to the



Isthmus of Panama. She had disembarked a generation earlier than my (True's) grandfather, hiked the Isthmus, and caught a ship on the other side, joining Christian, her husband to be at Trinidad Bay. May was born in Humboldt County in 1867.⁹ She was their



youngest child.

A view of the plaza and the location of MP's home taken between 1906 and 1911. McKinley's statue was dedicated in 1906, and the old Arcata Presbyterian church is at upper left. The existing Arcata Presbyterian church was dedicated in 1911. The second building from the right shows the mortuary building of John G. Dolson.

May didn't want to live in the mountains so MP eventually sold Big Bend Ranch. When the railroad did not go through the Benbow property, he sold that also to Ernest Lindser.

In 1899 Melvin moved his family to the Fernald home at the southeast corner of 10th and G streets in Arcata, so that Atlant could attend school in town. He leased the Phillips ranch and buildings out to a series of leasers and workers.

After Mel's death, the ranch was operated by the three Roberts children and their families. In 1934 the 225 acre ranch was divided between Hazel Roberts Anderson and Atlant Roberts Dolson, who agreed that the Philips house would go to to the Anderson's and the Stokes house on 7th street would be moved onto Atlant's property. Both houses are still standing.

⁹ Notes of True Hoyle

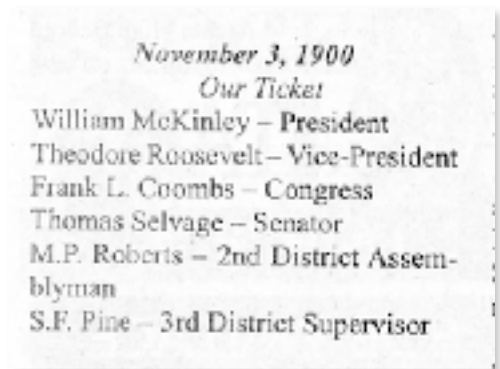
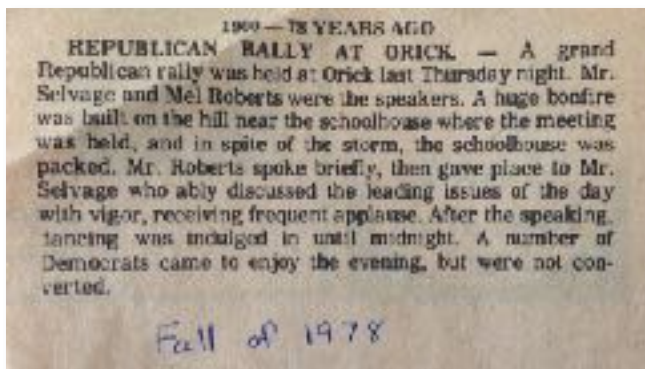
Later Career

Beginning in the 1890s, Melvin and several other local men, formed the Arcata Land Improvement Company, which undertook construction of the dikes at the edge of Humboldt Bay so that they could create pastureland out of the low-lying wetlands and thus increase their land holdings. The men in the community decided to support Mel in an effort to be elected to the state legislature to change a law so they could file on the land in the “overflow bay land” of Jacoby and Beith creeks.

At right, MP Roberts in the backyard of his home at 10th and G in front of his cherry tree.



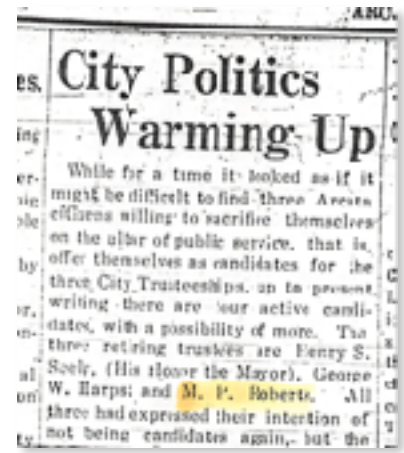
In 1901, Melvin was elected to the State Assembly. He was the Assemblyman for the Second Assembly District in the California Legislature from 1901 until 1909. His voting record indicates he was a staunch conservative Republican. Through their efforts, the dikes were built and hundreds of acres of wetlands were “reclaimed.” The dikes are now located under Highway 101 and south of 11th street on the south side of Arcata.



In 1910, after leaving the California Assembly, Melvin was appointed City Trustee of Arcata. In 1912, he was appointed to a four-year term as the Arcata City Trustee. Politically, Melvin was a Progressive. As head of the Johnson Club in 1910, Melvin was

instrumental in carrying Humboldt County for Governor Johnson of California. He also continued to be active in many local events.

Melvin belonged to many organizations, including the Masonic Order; Arcata Blue Lodge, No. 106; Eureka Commandery No. 35; and the Islam Temple of San Francisco. He was also a stockholder and President of United Creameries, which produced two tons of butter daily from its Arcata plant.



By 1911, Melvin owned several ranches: the 225-acre Phillips/Stokes ranch, another 160 acres at the West End, on the Mad River, and a 1300-acre stock ranch on the South Fork of the Eel River, which was primarily used for sheep.

In 1912, Melvin and May's oldest daughter was married to Albert Rush Dolson in a private ceremony at their home on 10th and G. This picture shows Mel and May along with members of the Dolson family.



LR - Top: May and Melvin Roberts, Atlant Roberts Dolson, Rush Dolson, Thomas and Clara Devlin, Reverend John T. Shurtieff, John Gray, and Emma Mary Dolson.

Bottom: Alexia Devlin, Mel Roberts II, Tom Daven Devlin, David Milo Dolson, Harry Dolson, Hazel Roberts.

By the time he retired, Melvin was an established figure in the community. He enjoyed people and until the time of his death was often seen sitting on a box on the north

end of the Plaza greeting everyone as they went by. G street, where he lived, was also the main road through Arcata and up the coast.

A few of the letters MP wrote to his family still remain, and this letter to his daughter Atlant dated May 17th, 1914, MP writes about some of his recollections:

"My Dear Girl, I read your letter and you do not know with what pleasure I reads it. All Ex-Humbolder's are friends of mine. those people you saw, gray haired men and women, are all friends of long ago. the Beckwith family always were favorites of mine they lived at Hydesville. Ed Cutting and his wife, Mary Stalder was her name, we were young together. Frank Weck and I were boys together and Maya Barman and I used to run the dances in Eureka in the olden time. 45 or 50 years makes a difference.

You must remember it is 54 years since I came to Humboldt. In 1860 there was not a bridge or wagon road in the county. I have helped do it all, that is my small share. The time was once when I knew personally every one in the county. And it shows their memory of me is the reception you got when they were told you were Mell's girl.

I have been in Humboldt, boy and man, 54 years and have taken my medicine as it came and never whined but have always tried to be a man among men and I think I have succeeded fairly well. You said you was proud to be Mell's girl. I am glad of that. I have never done a dishonorable act in my life and you don not know how much good it done me the way they received you when they knew who you were. You were in the midst of my boyhood friends.

God Bless them, give my love to them all, Ed, Frank, Maya and all the rest, especially the Beckwith family. Well I will close this long and rambling letter with love to you all. I remain yours as ever, Dad.

M.P. Roberts





In this photo, Melvin and May are shown with 6 of their 7 grandchildren. (John Gray Dolson was not born until after Melvin's death.) From LR: True Dolson, Beverly Roberts, Melvin Roberts III, Martha Dolson, Dona Anderson. Ross Roberts is in front. Mel died in 1926, and True appears to be about 4 or 5, so this photo would have been taken between 1923-25.

True's memories: "My grandfather's lap was a haven and a fascinating place for a small child. He smelled of pipe smoke: there was a watch I could hold to my ear, and several Masonic Lodge pins on his shirt that I was allowed to finger. At almost eighty years of age he still exuded the confidence he had held all of his life." Beverly Roberts Hermann, also fondly recalls her grandfather. She talks about how friendly and open he was, and how he liked to sit on his porch and talk to people.

Burial and Internment



Melvin Parker Roberts died on January 15, 1926, in Arcata, California and is buried in Greenwood Cemetery alongside his wife.



