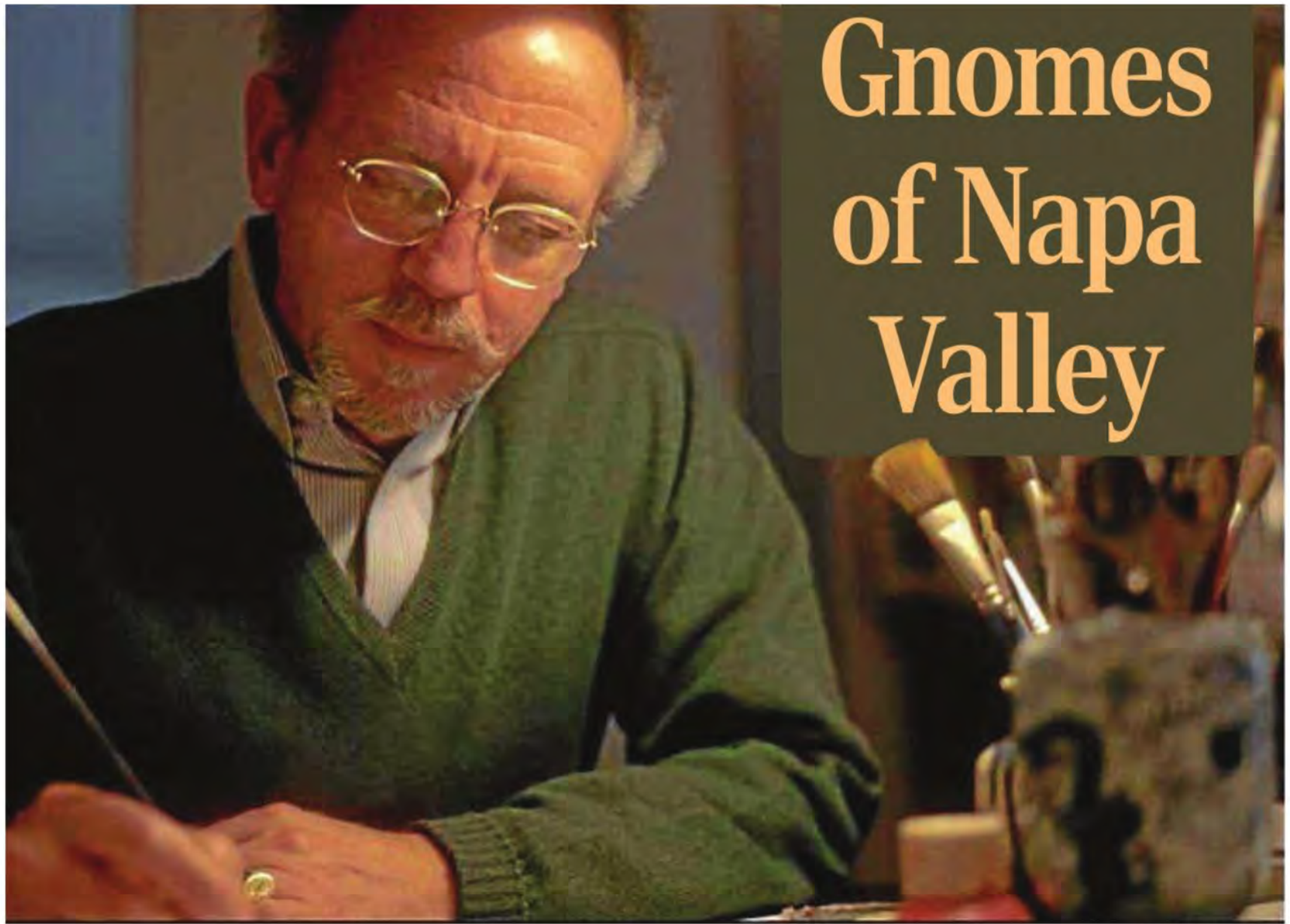


# ST. HELENA STAR

THURSDAY, JANUARY 2, 2025 | sthelenastar.com | Published in the Heart of Napa Valley Since 1874



SUBMITTED PHOTO

A. Cort Sinnes of Napa is an author and artist whose trilogy of fantasy novels is rooted in Napa Valley history.

## Fantasy trilogy is rooted in local history

**JESSE DUARTE**  
jduarte@sthelenastar.com

What if a band of gnomes lived on Mount St. Helena — gnomes with a massive horde of gold?

That's the hook behind A. Cort Sinnes' novel "The Silverado Journals," a trilogy of fantasy novels that blend Napa Valley history and Scandinavian folklore.

It's in many ways a St. Helena story, especially in the first volume. Characters eat at Giugni's and Taylor's Refresher, shop at Steves Hardware, read the St. Helena Star police log — already a must-read in 1967

when part of the story takes place — and track down clues at the Carnegie Building, which then housed the St. Helena Public Library.

And of course, there's the mystery of Mount St. Helena: Who keeps stealing (or "procuring") things and leaving behind pouches of gold?

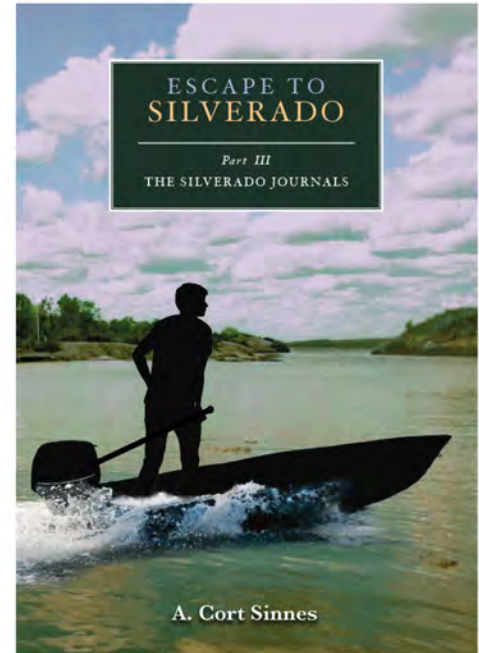
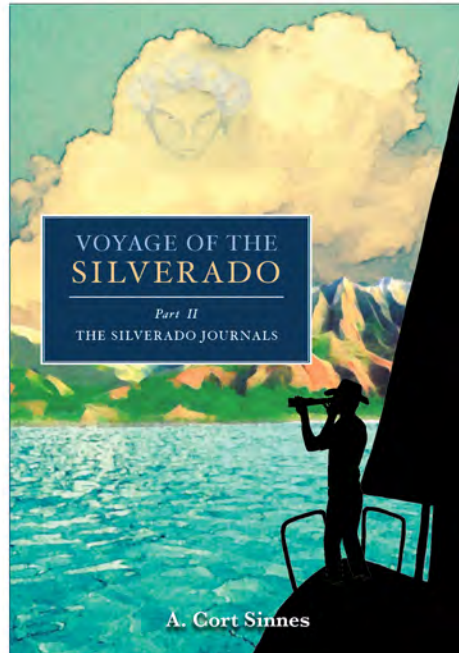
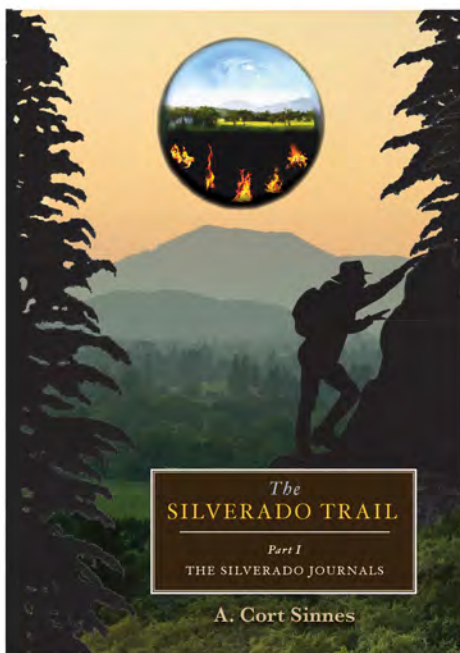
The story is also rooted in Scandinavian stories about gnomes, who are said to be fond of quicksilver (mercury). In the late 19th century, Mount St. Helena was known for its quicksilver mines, so one shouldn't be surprised to find gnomes in

the vicinity.

"If you live in the Napa Valley or you love it, this enriches your experience of the valley," Sinnes said. "If you read just the first one, I don't think you could ever look at Mount St. Helena in the same way again."

A Napa author and artist whose own illustrations adorn the three volumes of "The Silverado Journals," Sinnes said "words and pictures" have always been central to his life. He still has the journals he started writing in grammar school.

Please see **AUTHOR**, Page A8



## Author

From A6

He worked toward an English degree at UC Berkeley but dropped out to take his "dream job" of writing for Walter Doty, the retired longtime editor of *Sunset* magazine who'd recently launched Ortho Books, which went on to become a successful series of garden books. The job was 12 hours a day, seven days a week, but it was "exactly what I'd wanted to do," Sinnes recalled.

Sinnes went on to write 18 books about gardening and eight cookbooks.

Sinnes remembers the idea for "The Silverado Journals" taking shape in his head "in a few seconds" in 1980 — beginning, middle and end. That outline didn't change over the decades Sinnes spent writing the books in his spare time before publishing them over the last 10 years.

The story involves real historical figures like Gustave Niebaum, who before founding Inglenook Winery in 1879 was a Finnish

sea captain. Sinnes' father and grandfather also happened to be Finnish sea captains, and Sinnes grew up listening to their enthralling stories of nautical adventure.

Sinnes' father told of arriving in Honolulu and discovering a pair of teenage stowaways who'd snuck onto the ship in San Francisco and lived on canned peaches.

"Stories like that were roaming around in my head because of my grandfather and my father, and one day they coalesced into this story," Sinnes said.

Sinnes interweaves fantasy with history. It turns out the gnomes were already living on Mount St. Helena when Robert Louis Stevenson and his wife brief Fanny famously spent their honeymoon there.

"They left Stevenson alone because he didn't have anything for them to steal," Sinnes said.

The first volume is set in the Napa Valley, the second mostly in Kauai, and the third in Scandinavia and Europe, where the human characters try to reunite a band of gnomes with their compatriots on

Mount St. Helena.

Sinnes said he wrote "The Silverado Journals" to appeal to youngsters ages 12 to 14, but adults particularly seem to enjoy it, so he's settled for calling it an "all-ages adventure."

The trilogy is published by Sinnes' own Hearth & Garden Productions and available through any bookstore and on Amazon.

You can reach Jesse Duarte at 707-967-6803 or [jduarte@sthelenastar.com](mailto:jduarte@sthelenastar.com).

## From A. Cort Sinnes' 'The Silverado Trail'

A. CORT SINNES

(This is an excerpt from "Clues at the Library," chapter 8 of A. Cort Sinnes' novel "The Silverado Journals, Part I: The Silverado Trail." The main character, Nick Sinclair, is trying to unravel a mystery, so he heads to the old St. Helena Public Library at the Carnegie Building.)

I grabbed my bike off the front porch of the bunkhouse. Snoops was asleep right next to it and looked up when I moved it, as if to ask me if I wanted him to come. I told him to stay put and I think he was relieved after all the exercise he had earlier, following me back and forth to the river. I took off down the driveway, gravel crunching under my bike's skinny tires, and turned right onto the highway towards town, some four miles north.

As soon as I hit the two-lane highway, I began to have doubts about the idea I had had back at the farm. In an effort to keep me up to date with what was going on at home, Ma-D had ordered a subscription to the St. Helena Star — the local weekly newspaper — and had it sent to me at school. It was filled with local news, most of which didn't interest me that much, but the Police Log column was a different story: It was filled with all the calls the St. Helena Police Department had received during the week, and it was the

one thing I always read, mostly because of the crazy stuff it contained — the usual cats stuck up trees, a guy who was so drunk he went to bed in a stranger's house, mysterious loud music coming from the middle of a vineyard and a lot of lost-and-found items.

I remembered Sheriff Lyman saying that he would put a notice in the Police Log section of the St. Helena Star about the pouch I'd found in the trough. I also remembered what Charlie, the guy sheriff Lyman was talking to in the bathroom, had said — that the gold-filled pouch "was another one for the Eagle's Nook file." I figured if there were other similar cases in the past, there should be other notices in the Police Log, right? Notices of other leather pouches found somewhere in the valley? Made sense to me. But the more I thought about it, the shakier my idea seemed. I wasn't even sure the library kept back issues of the Star. And if they didn't, then where would I be?

Once the highway reached the outskirts of St. Helena, it turned into Main Street — about a three-block-long, tree-lined street containing old, two- and three-story commercial buildings, most of them built in the late 1800s. I sped through town and turned left at the north end of town, to the old library, just a block off of

Main Street.

I left my bike, not bothering to lock it, in the stand outside the library. Once inside, I recognized Mrs. Fly — it was a hard name to forget — behind the check-out counter. She had been a librarian there for as long as I could remember and used to be the person who came to our school to read stories to us kids.

"Hi Mrs. Fly. How are you?" I asked quietly, standing in front of the counter.

"Is that you, Nick Sinclair? My, you've certainly grown."

"Yeah, well, you know..." I said, looking at my shoes.

"As a matter of fact, I do know. Time! What's it all about? Do you want to hear a story?"

"Yeah, sure," I said, remembering that, for an adult, Mrs. Fly could be pretty funny.

Leaning over the counter, speaking like she was telling me some secret, Mrs. Fly whispered: "There's an old lady who lives in my bathroom."

"Really?" I said, interested.

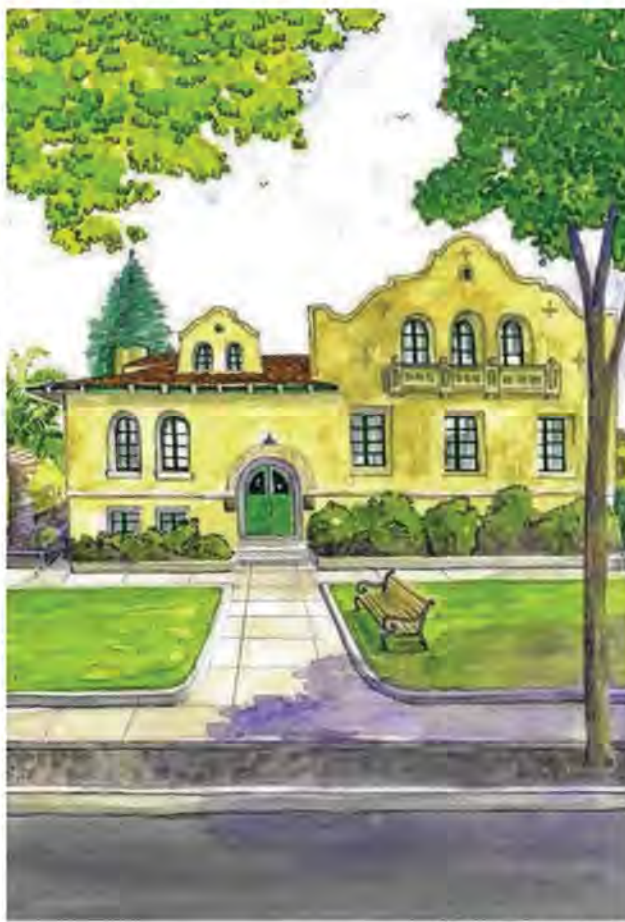
"Yes. And she's really fast."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, every morning I go in there, and I can see her in the mirror and I turn around as fast as I can and she's gone!"

I thought about it for a minute,

Please see EXCERPT, Page A8



A. CORT SINNES ILLUSTRATION

An illustration by author/artist A. Cort Sinnes showing St. Helena's Carnegie Building.

## Excerpt

From A6

got the joke, and laughed, even though I wasn't sure I should have.

"What brings you in here so late in the day? It looks like you're on some kind of a mission."

"I am, kind of," I said. "Do you have old copies of the St. Helena Star here?"

"Old copies? Like how old?"

"I'm not sure..." I said, trailing off. I had the sinking feeling that my mission was about to turn into a wild goose chase.

"Well, we keep the last couple of months of them in the periodical section."

"I think I'm going to have to look further back than that."

"If you don't mind me asking, what are you looking for?"

"I'm not exactly sure, but if it's there, it'll be in the Police Log section."

"Hm... in that case we'll have to check in the microfiche section. We have copies of the Star all the way back to when it started in 1874."

"Really?"

"Yep. Do you know how to work a microfiche reader?"

"No," I said, not even knowing what microfiche was.

"There's nothing to it. Come on over here."

I followed her over to a desk in middle of the library. I noticed I was the only person there, which was just fine by me. There was a machine on the desk that looked a little like a small television.

"So where do you want to start?" Mrs. Fly asked.

"What do you mean?" I said, feeling like I was already in over my head.

"What issue do you want to start with?"

"How about this time a year ago?" I said, not being able to think of a better answer.

"Okay" Mrs. Fly said and went over to a storage case and pulled out a smallish black box filled with what looked like sheets of black-and-white negative film. "So here's what you do. First you have to turn the thing on," she said,

flipping a switch at the back of the machine, causing the screen to light up. "Each one of these sheets contains a year's worth of the Star. You insert the film — this one's from last year — into this slot and then you use these little levers to position the lens over the top left-hand corner. Just like a book, the images are in order, left to right, top to bottom. It doesn't take much pressure to move around on the page, but you'll get the hang of it. Here, give it a try."

Mrs. Fly had left the lens centered on the image of the front page of the Star from exactly a year earlier. I operated the levers and pages of the newspaper whizzed by. Sure enough, it didn't take me long to figure out how to get from page to page. Each issue of the Star was only six or so pages, and the Police Log was always on the same page in each issue. In a few minutes I was running through the issues quickly, scanning the Police Log for any mention of a leather pouch — so quickly it had a dizzying, almost hypnotic effect. After about an hour, I felt like I was in a trance. I stood up to stretch and Mrs. Fly called over to me, "Find what you're looking for?"

"Not yet."

"Well, we're open for another couple of hours."

"I don't know if my eyes can take another couple of hours of this, but thanks," I said and sat back down. I'd reached the point where I was almost certain I wasn't going to find what I was looking for. I had gone through nine years of the Star when I saw it — a headline on the front page: "Upvalley Family Killed in Crash on Mt. St. Helena." Of course I knew the facts; I don't know how, but I knew them all. But somehow I'd never seen the article before. After all these years, it made it even more real. My eyes spontaneously filled with tears as I read the first lines of the article. About how we hit a deer and went off the road, hitting a massive pine tree. About how we had been returning from a dinner with my mom's family in Middletown. I had only the vaguest memories of the accident. About all I remembered

was lying on a pile of leaves after the accident and the way they smelled and being taken to the hospital in an ambulance with the siren going.

I sat just staring at the screen, not reading any more of the article. A huge wave of sadness came over me and I thought I was going to be sick. I got up and went to the bathroom. I went into one of the stalls, closed the door and sat on the toilet and held my head in hands. Suddenly I was crying as more memories came flooding in. The way my mother's pearl necklace felt on my face when she bent over me and the way she smelled, kissing me good night in my bed. The scratchiness of my father's chin when he held my head next to his, telling me how much he loved me. The way my brother, Lucas, and I would wrestle on the grass, Lucas always winning and how he taught me to climb the big fig tree in our backyard. One huge wave of blurred images and feelings.

I've always known these memories were there, but I learned to hold them in check. They were too much. Too sad. Sometimes I hated the fact that I was here and they weren't. Other times, even with Ma-D and Walter, even with Grandma Hattie, I felt very alone. The strength of these feelings was so strong I didn't know what would happen if I let them out. I knew I couldn't do anything to help my mom, my dad, my brother. And they couldn't do anything to help me. So whenever the memories came creeping in I'd do something, anything — ride my bike as far and as fast as I could, run through the vineyards and down to the river — anything to replace the feelings with motion, with movement taking me away from the hurt.

I sat on the toilet for a few more minutes and finally stopped crying. I forced myself to come around. I realized where I was, namely sitting in library bathroom, crying my eyes out and that I really didn't want to be there. I got up and splashed cold water in my face at the sink. I dried my face with a wad of paper towels and avoided

looking at myself in the mirror. I needed to get back to what I was doing — back to the here and now. I went back to where I had been sitting in front of the microfiche reader. In a couple of minutes I was back speeding through year after year of the Police Logs. All of a sudden it was there. I wasn't sure if I could believe my eyes. I reread the entry and cried out "yes!" forgetting for the moment where I was.

"Yes what?" Mrs. Fly asked.

"I, ummm, I may have found something."

"I'm sure you've found a lot of things, but is it what you were looking for?"

"I'm not sure."

I reread the entry for the third time: "Found at Black's Nursery: Small leather, drawstring pouch. If you are the owner, please contact Sheriff Billings at the Napa County Sheriff's Department to describe contents and verify ownership."

"Wow," I said under my breath.

I walked over to where Mrs. Fly was sitting just as the telephone on her desk rang. "Hold on a minute, Nick," she said as she picked up the receiver. "St. Helena Public Library. Oh hi, Mary, nice to hear your voice. Yes, he's here. Yes. Yes. I'll tell him. Okay. Talk to you later."

"That was your aunt, Nick. She's says to get your... she says it's time for you to be home."

"Okay. Thanks, Mrs. Fly." I said, embarrassed that Ma-D had called. "I was just wondering. Is there any way to make a copy of what's on the screen?"

"Sure," said Mrs. Fly, "let me show you."

"You can just tell me how, I can do it."

"There's a small red print button on the right hand side of the screen. Just make sure the screen is displaying what you want printed and then push the button. The copy will come out the back of the machine."

"Thanks Mrs. Fly. Thanks for your help."

"That's what I'm here for."

I made the copy, folded it, and put it safely in my front shirt

pocket, not really believing I had actually found it. I thanked Mrs. Fly again and was halfway out the door when I suddenly remembered why I supposedly had to go to the library. It wouldn't look good to show up back at the farm without a book.

"Oh, Mrs. Fly, you don't happen to have a copy of Silverado Squatters, do you? By Robert Louis Stevenson?"

"Of course we do. Several copies. Do you want one?"

"Yes. My English teacher back at school thought I should read it this summer, seeing as how I was here in the valley and everything."

"You should read it. And you should hike up Mt. St. Helena to see where it took place. You know what the book's about don't you?"

"Kind of."

"It's about Robert Louis Stevenson's stay here in the valley back in 1880. He had just gotten married to Fanny Osbourne and didn't have any money, so he came up here and spent his honeymoon camped out in an abandoned mine called Silverado up on Mt. St. Helena. Great stuff. You'll like it. And while you're at it, take this one, too," she said as she handed me another book.

"What is it?" I asked.

"It's Stevenson at Silverado, written by a local author. It helps explain some of the things Stevenson wrote about in Silverado Squatters. We'll make you an expert on the subject!"

"I doubt that, but thanks!"

I checked the books out, said goodbye to Mrs. Fly and ran to get my bike out of the rack. I got back to the farm just as it was beginning to get dark. Getting off my bike, I realized I didn't remember anything about the ride back; my brain was racing way faster than I was.

Ma-D was waiting for me on the back porch.

"It's about time," she said.

"I told you I'd be back before dark."

"Barely... Did you find what you were looking for?"

Proving that I had what I went to the library to get, I waved the two books in the air and said "I think so, Ma-D. I think so."