

# Cornelia and Jess A Love Story

By Robert E. Colby

About four and three quarter miles above Inskip on the west side of Humbug Summit Road and just past the site of Chaparral House is a stone and concrete monument. A bronze plaque placed on the monument reads: CORNELIA LOTT SANK MEMORIAL SPRING. It is an affirmation of true love that flowered in Oroville and in the High Lake country above the Paradise Ridge.

California and Butte County. In 1851 he was elected to the State Senate, returning to practice law in Oroville in 1856. Elected judge of the Second Judicial District in 1869, he served for six years and then retired to resume his law practice until he died in 1918. He owned thousands of acres of choice farmland in the valley and was instrumental in starting the citrus industry in the area. He also was

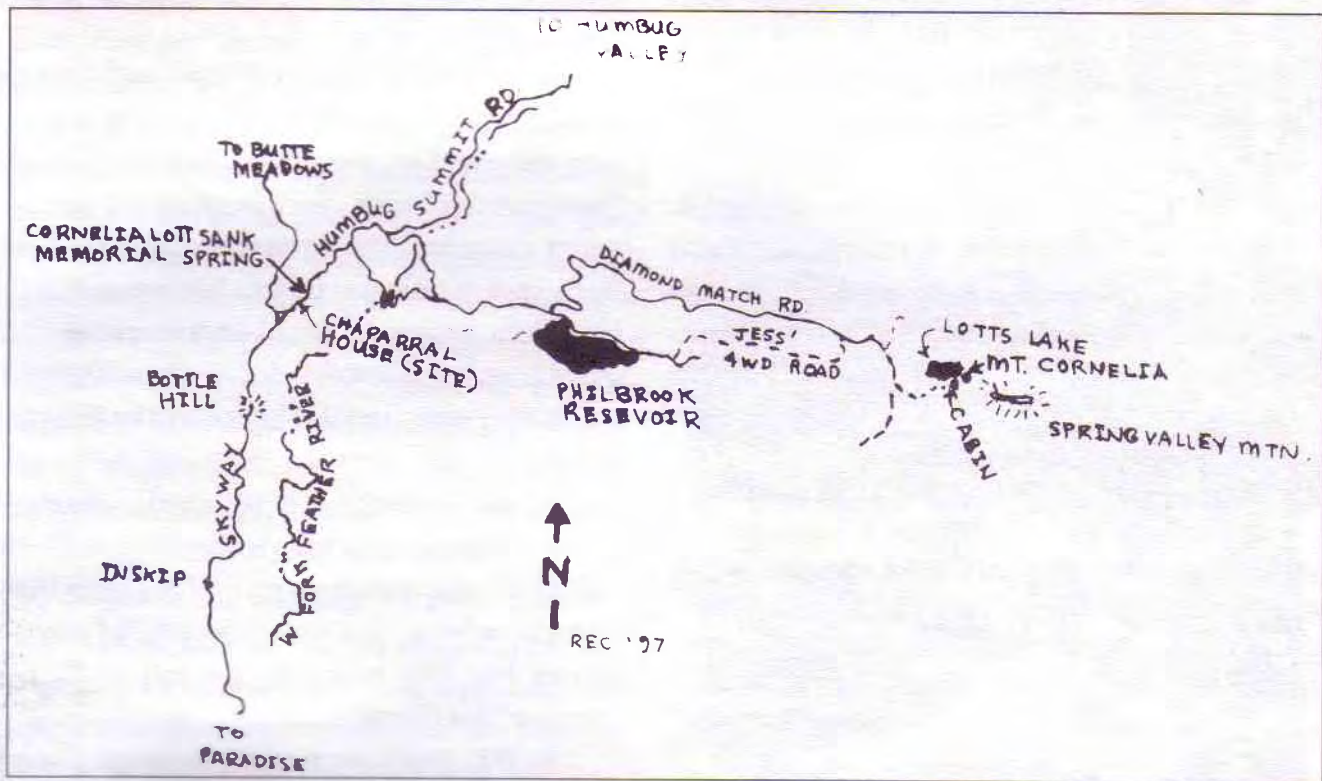


Figure 1. The High Lakes country above the Paradise Ridge.

Cornelia Dear Lott was the only daughter of Judge Charles Fayette Lott who came by wagon from Quincy, Illinois via the Lassen Trail to Long's Bar in 1849. A lawyer and associate of Abraham Lincoln in Illinois, Lott had scant success at gold mining. However, in 1850 he was one of the few lawyers in the "diggins" and so opened a law office. He was a participant in the formation of the State of

known as a very tough landlord to his tenant farmers. He also bought considerable acreage in the high country above Philbrook Lake, including a secluded lake that became known as Lotts Lake. He built a considerable fortune of which he was perhaps overly protective, as we shall see.

He married Susan Hyer of an influential Philadelphia family in 1856. Sometime during his tenure



as circuit judge he met a young woman named Marie Crowe and moved her into his home as a seamstress to make clothes for his wife and later for Cornelia. Miss Crowe eventually came to run the Lott household with total authority. In 1873 a son, Charles Fayette, was born. Fay, as he was known, was respected in the community, but somewhat eccentric. He liked to take a telescope and look at ladies ankles as they held their skirts up to enter carriages or cross the muddy streets of Oroville. He never married; the judge having informed him that he would be cut off from his inheritance if he ever took a wife. Supplied with a generous allowance, he never worked a day in his life. After he died the floor under the wall-to-wall carpet in his bedroom was found to be lined with gold pieces. There were enough to pay for extensive remodeling of the Lott home after he died. And considering who did the remodeling, Fay probably would have "turned over in his grave" had he known.

Cornelia, known as "Neely" to her friends, was born January 2, 1876. A delicate child with azure blue eyes, she had a facial tick, supposedly due to a fall down the stairs her mother took when she was pregnant with Cornelia. Never allowed the



**Figure 2. Cornelia the year before she met Jess in 1920. She is at Wymans Ravine on a camping trip frying bacon. Courtesy of the Lott Home.**

freedom and privileges other girls and young women of her time had, she had a few girlhood friends. She loved literature, works of art and growing flowers, but not cut flowers. She painted landscapes and grazing horse scenes. She seldom wore anything but black.

Miss Crowe, whose word was now household law, decided Cornelia should be sent off to a "fashionable young ladies" school in San Francisco. She was not even permitted to come home for vacations or the holidays and hated every minute of school. When at home in Oroville, she generously used much of her large allowance to aid the poor and ill in Oroville. Cornelia was a member of the Episcopal church and a charter member of the Gold of Ophir Parlor of the Native Daughters of the Golden West.

Judge Lott was extremely strict with Cornelia when it came to male admirers. Anytime a young man expressed an interest in Cornelia he would "run them off" with gruff instructions never to return. He turned the hose on at least one. He feared that admirers were just fortune hunters only interested in the money she would inherit someday. The only exception, Frank Steadman, when asked if he was in love with Cornelia replied that he liked her, but could never marry her. After that he stopped visiting and walking her home and any fondness she had for him faded away. So Cornelia, at 42, was well on the way to becoming a spinster when Judge Lott died in 1918. And if this was not bad enough, brother Fay then took over the roll of "father/protector" for Cornelia.

In 1920 things were about to change though. One hot summer day while Cornelia was rocking on the front porch of her home, two men entered the yard. Ernest Lindsay was an old family friend and with him was a man Cornelia did not know. His name was Jess Sank and he worked with Lindsay at the New York Machine shop. Cornelia later said he just stood there in the heat, sweaty and dirty in his work clothes, khaki pants and shirt left over from his service in World War I. To complete the picture, his hair was a mess and he was missing two front





**Figure 3. The Lott Home and the porch where the romance began. Part of the pergola Jess erected is visible on the right. Courtesy of the Digger Shopper.**

teeth. In spite of his appearance Cornelia was attracted to him. Perhaps it was his “country cousin” look and amiable manner.

Jess Sank was born in 1886 in Maryland and brought up on the farm. He had lived in Texas and moved to Oroville in 1914, working at mining and various other jobs. He was a hard worker and was known for his home-made pickles and horseradish, something he had learned to make on the farm and which he sold in Oroville. Jess loved the great outdoors and to roam the mountains.

Even though Jess did not see Cornelia for sometime after their first meeting, the attraction was mutual. When he did try to call on her, brother Fay would not let him near the house and would order him off the property. And not just once. Every time Jess would show up a loud argument would follow. But Jess was persistent and one time even pitched a tent in the Lott yard near the cook’s quarters. It was all Fay could do to get him off the property. Fortunately for Fay, who was the smaller, Jess was easy going although he never thought of giving up.

Help was about to arrive in the form of Grandma Lindsay who decided that something had to be done to promote the stalled romance. Jess and Cornelia started meeting at her house and the homes of other friends. This clandestine romance continued, all properly chaperoned, for seven years!

On April 15, 1927 Fay died and soon afterwards, Jess erected a pergola from the front gate to the entrance of the Lott home. He and Cornelia exchanged their vows in the pergola and he placed a small bronze plate in the column next to where they stood with the inscription: IN COMMEMORATION OF A KISS AND A PROMISE BETWEEN THESE COLUMNS.



**Figure 4. Cornelia costumed for a ‘49er celebration in 1927. This photo was taken on the sidewalk outside the Lott Home. It is a good guess that the shadow of the photographer is that of Jess also in costume with top hat. Courtesy of the Lott Home.**

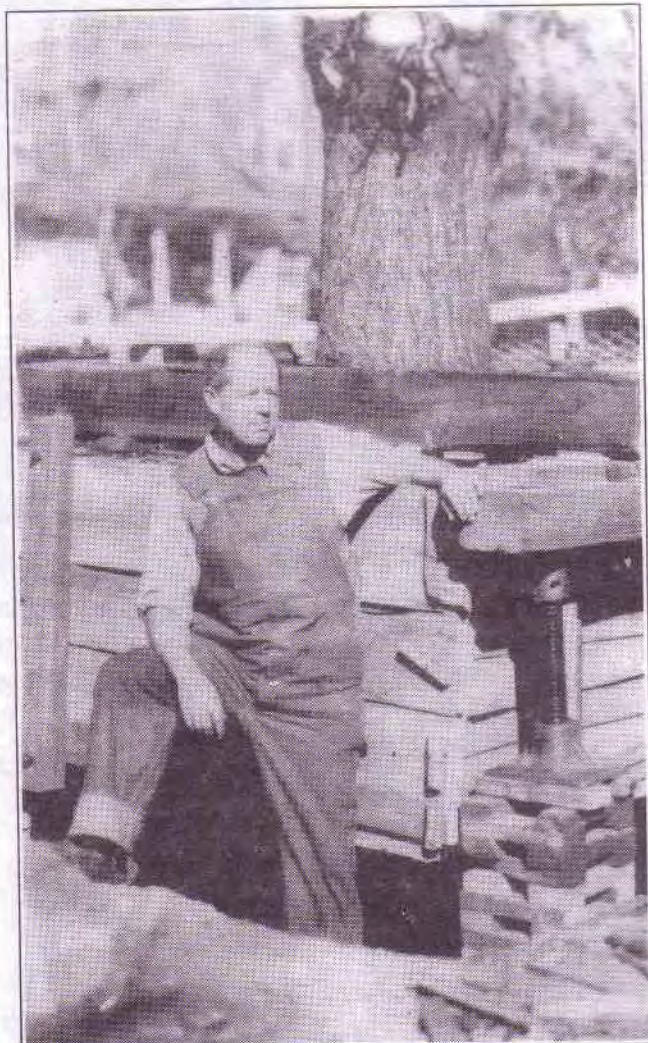
Married on June 5, 1927, just two weeks after Charles Lindbergh’s epic solo flight across the Atlantic Ocean Cornelia now experienced a freedom she had never known while the judge and her brother were her “protectors”. Yes, Jess was now master of the Lott house, but he and Cornelia were a loving team. Some said Cornelia was the power behind the throne, but if so Jess did not seem to mind. One of the first things Jess did was move Miss Crowe out of the house into an old ladies home



in San Francisco. Nice as the home was, it was rather poetic justice. And even though Cornelia did not like Miss Crowe, she financially supported her in the home.

Betty Davis, daughter of Cornelia's close friend, Florence Danforth Boyle, remembers her while she was growing up. As a child, about 1934-35, she thought of Cornelia as a very prim and proper lady with a precise manner. "She seldom spoke first to people; preferring to wait for their comment and then reply".

They made many changes to the home from remodeling to new furniture, including a lavish chestnut bedroom suite embellished with pink flow-



**Figure 5. Jess was always known as a worker. The date and location of the photograph are unknown. However from his appearance Jess could be in his late 40's or early 50's, within 10 years of his and Cornelia's marriage. Courtesy of the Lott Home.**

ers. That Jess was devoted to Cornelia is evident in the work he did in remodeling the Lott home. He built the fireplace in the parlor and set the word LOVE in colorful stones imbedded in the hearth. And then there is the upstairs bathroom. In the 1930s Jess transformed a storage room on the second floor into a large bathroom that was far ahead of its time. He even wired in a radio so that Cornelia could listen while she bathed. While he was building it, a favorite pastime for Cornelia was sitting in her rocker in the hall and conversing with Jess while he worked. Normally conservative and very prudent, this masterpiece of pink tile cost them \$1000. They were so proud of their "splurge" that they would invite guests upstairs just to see the bathroom.

Jess studied finance and investments and took over and expertly managed Cornelia's considerable portfolio, much to her pleasure.

They entertained often in their home, but otherwise were not all that social. Avant garde for her day, Cornelia enjoyed a cigarette in her long holder over a demitasse. On the anniversary of their first meeting, Cornelia would always wear the pale blue voile dress that she had worn that hot June day. Her birthdays were always special and Jess would throw a big party at which he would present her with a beautiful present, often one he had made. After all those years, Cornelia was in love with a husband that loved her in return.

They traveled occasionally and always made an annual trip to visit Grandma Lindsay on her birthday in Los Angeles where she had moved. Their favorite trip was to the High Lakes country above Paradise, to Lotts Lake. Jess had loved the Sierra since he had come to California and the Lott family had been summering at Lotts Lake for years. In 1870 the judge had built what was known as the Old Lake House, on the slope of Spring Valley Mountain overlooking the lake. And now Cornelia and Jess would spend much of each summer in cabin Jess built in 1928-29 on the mountain looking down into deep blue waters of the lake. It was only the second cabin at the lake. Jess even named a





**Figure 6. The 1922 Buick Touring Car that Jess and Cornelia used to travel the High Lakes country. Currently it is on display in the carriage house/garage of the Lott Home. Courtesy of the *Digger Shopper*.**

peak overlooking the lake Mount Cornelia.

Once at the lake, they did not miss the heat and hustle and bustle of Oroville. They came to town if some occasion demanded it. Otherwise, every couple of weeks Jess would come to town to get supplies and

any mail. He never did much to keep up the rough road from Philbrook Lake as he wanted to discourage visitors to their private place. He had a 1922, high clearance Buick touring car that he used to get to the lake and it climbed over the rocks and washouts just fine. It is said, however, that at least two tires blew out on each trip. They traveled all over the high lake area in that Buick.

They often took her little terrier, Brownie, as is indicated by the following scratched in what was then fresh concrete along side the cabin: Sept. 9, 1941 CS JS GQ BROWNIE. (The identity of GQ is unknown.) "Cornelia and Jess were very happy - they seemed to be living a charmed life, just living for each other's happiness surrounded by enchantment and all the loveliness in the world."<sup>1</sup>

In her last year Cornelia seemed to change, losing interest in the world about her and worrying about what would happen to Jess when she was not with him any more. She even did not want to go to their lake retreat anymore. She did not appear ill



**Figure 7. Cornelia and Jess in the orange grove at the Lott Home. This photograph, taken in 1950, is the last one of them together. Courtesy of the Lott Home.**



while preparing for the 1953 summer vacation to Lotts Lake, but she really wanted to stay home. She changed her mind though when Jess said that he did not want to go without her. Early in the morning of August 15, after they had been there only a few days, she became ill suddenly and died within a few hours in the cabin overlooking the lake where she and Jess had spent so many happy hours together. At dawn, with the aid of a local fisherman and their housekeeper, Josie, who had accompanied them, Jess placed Cornelia in the automobile for their last trip down the mountain together.



LOTT'S LAKE AND MT. CORNELIA

*You are cordially invited to attend the dedication of the Cornelia Lott Sank Memorial Spring at Chaparral, California, Sunday, July 18, 1954 at 2 p. m. by Florence Boyle, Past Grand President of Native Daughters of the Golden West and Rev. Wm. T. Holt, Vicar Saint Paul's Episcopal Church, Oroville, California.*

*Jess*  
1067 Montgomery St.  
Oroville, Calif.

*Would suggest you wear plain clothes.*

#### Plaque

**CORNELIA LOTT SANK MEMORIAL SPRING**  
Designed and erected by her husband Jess in memory of his wife. These rocks are from the foundation of the original Chaparral barn. The iron in this cover is from the doors of her fathers office in Oroville built in 1856. Dedicated July 18, 1954 by Florence Boyle, Past Grand Pres. N. D. G. W. Built by the Butte Creek Rock Co. Chico, Calif.

Harry H. Hume, Engineer in Charge.

Mercury Printers

**Figure 8. A copy of an invitation to the dedication of the memorial signed by Jess. The photograph on the cover is taken from the west end of Lotts Lake. Courtesy of Betty Davis.**

According to Marcia Hume, whose family has property on the lake adjacent to the cabin, Plumas County authorities felt that it was improper for Jess to take her out of the county after her death. Legally they were correct, but one feels that this was the last thing Jess would have been concerned about, given his love for Cornelia. After a funeral in the garden of the Lott-Sank home, Cornelia was buried in the family plot in the Oroville Cemetery.

Jess went on without his beloved Cornelia, but his thoughts were always with her. In 1954 he designed and had built the memorial to her at the old Chaparral House spring. He chose this site because on their trips up the Paradise Ridge and along Humbug Summit Road they would always stop here for a drink of cool water. The rocks were from the foundation of the original Chaparral House barn and the iron cover from the doors to her father's office, the first brick building in Oroville, constructed in 1856.



**Figure 9. Jess at the dedication ladling water from the spring. The memorial plaque can be seen to the left and the two candle holders that he made to the left rear. Courtesy of Betty Davis.**

For the dedication, Jess placed on the memorial a pair of candlesticks that he had carved of wood from the tree under which Cornelia had been baptized. In the presence of 150 of Cornelia's and





**Figure 10. Lotts Lake photographed from the bluff at the west end. Mount Cornelia is in the center. Their cabin is in the trees on the lower slope of the mountain across the saddle from Mount Cornelia. Red Hill and the creast of the Sierra can be seen to the left rear. Courtesy of the Author.**

Jess' friends the memorial was dedicated on July 18, 1954 by Cornelia's friend, Florence Danforth Boyle, Past Grand President of the Native Daughters of the Golden West. Jess asked each guest to place a message in a silver container which was buried in the base of the monument. Jess also had a fountain constructed to Cornelia's memory in the garden of the Lott home where today newly weds exchange their marriage vows.

Jess continued to visit the cabin at Lotts Lake and Marcia Hume remembers Jess telling stories about the lake and surrounding mountains. He spoke little about Cornelia though.

When Jess died on February 5, 1961 he carried to his grave his enduring love for Cornelia and the sentiment he had written and recited beside her casket: "Dear Cornelia: I will love you in death the same as I have always loved you in life." At the time he ended with "Till we meet again."<sup>2</sup>

This had come to pass and he was interred beside Cornelia, her loving and devoted husband and friend.

#### **Author's Note**

Lotts Lake is truly a jewel of the high lake country above the Paradise Ridge. At 6362 feet elevation, it is about 7.75 miles from Philbrook Reservoir over a reasonably good road built by

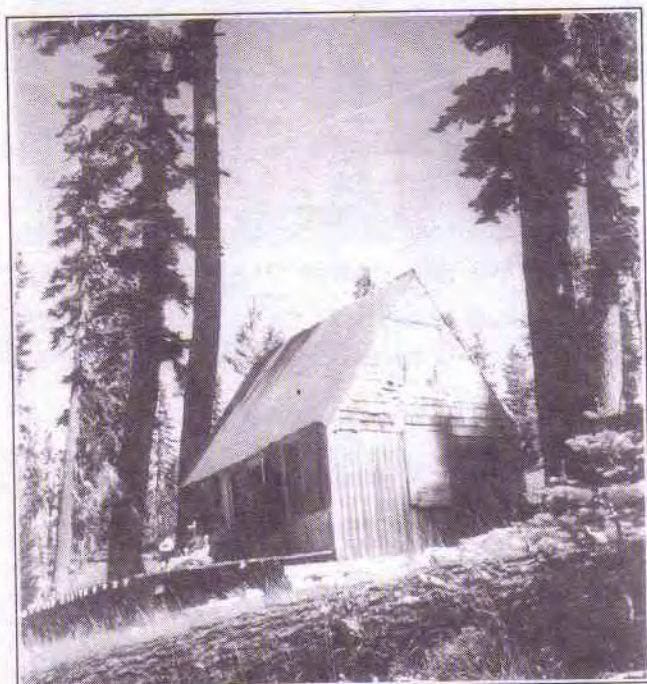


**Figure 11. The cabin that Jess built at Lotts Lake. It faces north overlooking the lake and the Sierra crest. Courtesy of the Author.**



Diamond Match Company within the last 20 years. The last mile is fairly rough. This is not the way Jess and Cornelia came in their Buick, though. They drove east from the reservoir and then, at about where Jones Resort is today, climbed the ridge to the north. Today, this road is impassable even in four wheel drive, not to mention the fact that the lower end is on private property.

Their cabin still stands on Spring Valley Mountain at the top of a steep slope that drops about 160 feet into the lake. Sitting on the porch one can see why they loved the place with it's magnificent view of the lake and the Sierra forests and valleys. Mt. Cornelia, less romantically but more properly called a rugged hill, is adjacent to the north across a shallow saddle. It drops about 240 feet into the east end of the lake. The north face drops 600 feet to two small lakes at the head of Chips Creek. The view from the summit is well worth the 100 foot climb from the saddle.



**Figure 12. A view of the cabin from the down slope to the lake and from the west. Note the porch from which the view is magnificent. Courtesy of the Author.**

The cabin is quite small with one room plus a separate, even smaller kitchen area. The back wall is dominated by a fireplace made of country rock.



**Figure 13. The fireplace in the back wall of the cabin with the andirons with Cornelia's and Jess' initials cut in them. Courtesy of the Author.**

To the east are two other dilapidated structures, apparently a bath house and guest quarters. A few feet above and west of the cabin is a monument on the site of the Old Lake House. All the property on the south shore of Lotts Lake is private and trespassing is not taken lightly by the owners. The Lott/Sank parcel is owned by the Native Sons of the Golden West. Permission to visit must be obtained from the Argonaut 8 Chapter of Oroville.

### End Notes

1. *Memoirs of the Lott-Sank Family*, Evelyn Joslyn, 1972.
2. *Ibid.*

### Sources:

"Gold Rush Manor Is Saved." James W. Lenhoff, *Diggin's*. Vol. 6, No. 4, 1962. Butte County Historical Society.

"Judge Charles Fayette Lott." *History of Butte County 1918 - Biography*. George C. Mansfield.

*Memoirs of the Lott-Sank Family*. Evelyn



Joslyn. 1973.

"Memorial Spring Dedicated In Ceremony at Chaparral." *Paradise Post*. July 23, 1954

"Impressive Ceremonies Held At Dedication of Chaparral Spring," *Oroville Mercury*, July 19, 1954. Also photograph of Jess at the spring in July 20, 1954 Issue.

I would also like to thank the following people for their help, without which this story would not have been half as interesting or romantic.

\*Ted Gobin, historian, resident and a teller of stories of the Ridge for 71 years, who first told me of Cornelia and Jess.

\*Betty Davis who from childhood knew Cornelia and Jess and whose mother, Florence Danforth Boyles, was a good friend to both Jess and Cornelia. She shared her memories and gave my wife and I a very interesting tour of Lott memorabilia at the Butte County Pioneer Memorial Mu-

seum in Oroville.

\*Nancy Price, City of Oroville Coordinator for the Lott Home, for her interesting insights into the Lott family. She also arraigned for the use of photographs of Cornelia and Jess, most of which have never been published before. Also Dottie Logue, docent at the Lott Home, for a personnel and informative tour.

\*Dick Bailey and Bob Kelleher, of The Native Sons of the Golden West and Dick's little dog Muffy whom we just happened to meet on our first visit to Lotts Lake. They spent the better part of an afternoon giving us a guided tour of the cabin and the area around the lake.

\*Bud Strang and Gene Sylva, both of the Argonaut 8 Chapter of The Native Sons of the Golden West for their interest, information and permission to visit the Lotts Lake property.

\*Marcia Hume, who knew Jess and Cornelia as neighbors at Lotts Lake.