



# VERNON MINERAL WATER

by Eric McGuire

The subject of this sketch, Josiah Sessions, was born in May 1826 to Nathaniel Paine Sessions and Nelly (Sarah) Warren, who were married in Thompson, Windham County, Connecticut on February 22, 1824.

Vernon Mineral Water bottles are 7.75 inches in height with a one pint capacity. All known specimens are aqua in color and blown at the San Francisco Glass Works in 1874. Their rarity suggests only one initial order was placed.




His family moved to nearby Plainfield, Windham County, about 1841. Eventually, at least eight children were born to Nathaniel and Sarah, although three died young.

Josiah's oldest sister, Olivia, married James Dyer in Plainfield, Conn., on October 15, 1850, but she died two years later on October 17, 1852, just 27 years old. Josiah's father died May 28, 1848, and as the oldest male, Josiah stayed with his family providing financial support until 1851, when he left for California to seek his fortune. He was in San Francisco by at least April of that year when it was reported that he was engaged in a fist fight over the ownership of a saddle and bridle with "J. Hamilton". Hamilton lost the fight and they were both hauled into court where Hamilton was fined \$20.00 for throwing the first punch. (1)

In the bustling port city of San Francisco, Josiah found his niche in the draying business. He purchased property across the San Francisco Bay in East Oakland and began raising horses for his business. Josiah married Harriet Parker January 1, 1856, in San Francisco and continued to reside in the city for another 10 years even though he maintained property in Oakland where he raised his team horses. Harriet was born in Longmeadow, Hampden County, Mass., in 1828, the daughter of Joseph and Harriet Davis Parker. She went to San Francisco with her 16 year old brother, Leonidas, in 1849 via Panama.

**BAY VIEW PARK.**



**Thursday, June 23, 1864.**

**TROTting MATCH IN HARNESS FOR \$500—Mile Heats, Three best in Five.**

Mr. Sessions names b. m. .... Lost Diamond  
Mr. Ferguson names b. h. .... Humboldt

Horses to start at 3 o'clock p. m.

**ADMISSION ..... ONE DOLLAR**

joe2l      W. F. WILLIAMSON, Proprietor

Perhaps she was his favorite horse – it may never be known, but Lady Vernon was obviously very special to Sessions, as it was she who was chosen as a namesake for his ranch. The Vernon Ranch became a well known place in the San Francisco Bay Area during Sessions' stock raising days.

Three of Josiah Sessions' brothers soon followed him to California, William W. , Charles A. and Milton P. (2)

Horses were Sessions' passion, for work as well as recreation. By 1861, he and his family moved from San Francisco to his East Oakland ranch where Sessions soon became involved in racing. He mainly focused on trotting matches and often personally participated in the races.

His equine competitiveness began with strength matches. In 1854, Sessions pitted his team against that of James Vance to determine which could pull the most weight. Both teams twice

1. Daily Alta California (San Francisco) April 3, 1851

2. William W. died September 15, 1922, in Oakland, Calif. Charles A. Sessions was killed in a train wreck near Byron, Calif., in December 1902. (San Francisco Call, December 22, 1902).

**C. M. CHASE & CO.,**  
**LIVESTOCK & GENERAL AUCTIONEERS**

Sales of Live Stock of all descriptions attended to in  
any part of the State.

**SATURDAY.**

SATURDAY.....November 2, 1872

AT 11 O'CLOCK A. M.,

**SPECIAL SALE**

—OF—

**Trotting Stock**

—AT—

**VERNON RANCH,**

2½ miles from Oakland.



On the above date we will close out, without reserve, the remainder of the Trotting Stock of Josiah Sessions, Esq., comprising over Forty Head of Young Stallions, Fillies, Brood Mares, etc., all of the most fashionable strains of trotting blood. The attention of breeders is specially directed to this sale.

**Terms Cash or approved paper.**

joe25      C. M. CHASE & CO.,  
Auctioneers.

Auction Ad for the remainder of Trotting Stock from Josiah Sessions Nov. 2 1872

pulled seven rail cars filled with sand and weighing 33 tons on the Mission Street Railway in San Francisco. (3) The \$500 dollar bet set aside for the winner was not allocated but high stakes racing soon became commonplace for Sessions, with his specialty being trotting horses.

Some of his successful trotters included Hamilton Chief, California Maid, Alameda Maid, Billy Hayward, Oakland Maid, Young Diamond, Ulster Chief, Young Diamond and Lost Diamond. He preferred Hambletonian blood-lines and imported a number of trotters from the Eastern states. In fact, Ulster Chief was sired by Rysdyk's Hambletonian, one of 1,335 foals the

Milton P. Sessions died in San Francisco on March 2, 1889.

3. Sacramento Daily Union, May 29, 1854



immortal Hambletonian produced.

Sessions reportedly was drilling a well on his Vernon Ranch property when he hit mineralized water. It took him very little time to understand the consequence of his discovery. Being in the business of hauling merchandise, Sessions was obviously aware of the cost of moving freight. Water is a heavy commodity, and to find the source of a mineral spring very near the San Francisco Metropolitan Area surely enticed him into developing the spring as a commercial venture, since mineral water was nearly as popular as bottled water is today. The first advertisements appeared in newspapers beginning in early 1874.

Session's mineral water bottles are one pint in capacity and marked VERNON MINERAL / WATER. Only aqua glass was used. The style and size is somewhat unusual with only one other mineral water bottle of similar - in fact nearly exact - shape made in California at that time. The Mechanic's Institute Fair display of the San Francisco Glass Works in September 1874 exhibited an example of Vernon Mineral Water along with its similar counterpart for Litton Springs Water from Sonoma County, California.

The same fair also hosted a display dedicated to Vernon Mineral Water. The San Francisco Bulletin of September 5, 1874, noted; "The Vernon mineral water, possessing medicinal properties, is displayed in bottles, and a barrel of the water is on tap. A conspicuous sign invites the thirsty visitor to 'take a drink'."

The first of two children born to Josiah and Harriet Sessions was Katherine (Kate) Olivia Sessions in San Francisco on November 8, 1857, and their only son, Frank Shattuck Sessions, was born in



A greatly enlarged portion of the San Francisco Glass Works display at the 1874 Mechanics Institute Fair showing an example of the Vernon Mineral Water bottle, with a small glass ball balanced on its top. The similar looking bottle to its left is an example of the Litton Springs bottle. These two bottles were the only examples produced in California with this shape.

**WONDERFUL DISCOVERY AT OUR VERY DOOR.**

In boring for an Artesian well on Josiah Sessions' property in Alameda County, near Tubbs' Hotel, a year ago, a stream of water was struck, possessing the most Wonderful Medicinal Properties. It is known by the name of

**VERNON MINERAL WATER.**

It has been in constant use by a number of parties afflicted with different maladies, and has made complete cures in some of the worst cases of Dyspepsia, Kidney Affections, Sick Headache, Constipation, Piles, Scrofula, etc. We refer to the following parties who have used and been cured by the famous VERNON MINERAL WATER. Dr. Washington Ayer; Mrs. Elizabeth Watson, Brooklyn; Mrs. Capell, Brooklyn; A. L. Van Vleet, corner Ellis and Eleventh streets, Oakland; Josiah Sessions; Mrs. Hook, Brooklyn; Milton Sessions, corner California and Battery streets; Mr. Putnam; Luke La Rue, and hundreds of others.

We have numerous testimonials from prominent parties, which we will be pleased to show to any one.

The following testimonial from one of San Francisco's most prominent and eminent physicians on the efficacy and curative powers of Vernon Mineral Water, speaks for itself:

To whom it may concern: I hereby certify that for several years I had been suffering from a phosphatic condition of the urine, which caused all the unpleasant symptoms of a severe disease of the kidneys. About one year ago my attention was called to some peculiarity of the water of a well sunk on the premises of Josiah Sessions at Oakland. I drank freely of it a few times and found great relief, and, in fact, have had no particular inconvenience nor suffering from the kidney since and my habit of life has not been changed. I attribute the change in my system to the effect of the Vernon Mineral Water, and would earnestly recommend those suffering in a like manner to make free use of it. The result of analysis of Vernon Mineral Water made by J. S. Phillips, an eminent chemist of this city, fully recommends its use to the attention of the medical profession, whose object is to relieve suffering through every available means made known to them.

Very Respectfully,  
WASHINGTON AYER, M. D.  
Office 414 Kearny.

**I. A. KENNEY, Agent, 238 Montgomery Street, San Francisco.**

Ad and testimony for Vernon Mineral Water, cures a lot of ailments.

San Francisco on June 4, 1864. Frank became the superintendent of sewers and street contracts for the City of Oakland in the 1880s and in 1890 was promoted deputy superintendent of streets. (4) He kept this position until 1892 and then became a street and grading contractor. (5) After his mother died in 1893 Frank went south to San Diego, but continued to switch his residence back to Oakland from time to time. When in San Diego he would live with and work for his sister, Kate. Frank married Katherine A. Nagle in 1909 but had no children. Frank died on August 15, 1931, in San Diego.

Both of the Sessions children were educated in Oakland, but it was Kate who pursued a higher education at the newly established University of California at Berkeley, not far from the Sessions' ranch. She entered in 1877 and graduated in 1881 with a Bachelor of Philosophy degree in chemistry. Kate moved to San Diego, California, where she briefly taught school there and in San Gabriel, Los Angeles County. With a partner, Kate invested in a plant nursery in 1885 and found her true calling in life, although she never completely gave up teaching, especially within the subject realm of plants and the natural world. She

4. San Francisco Call, December 6, 1890

5. San Francisco Call, October 19, 1892



eventually invested in an interest in commercial nurseries in Coronado, Balboa Park (City Park), Mission Hills and Pacific Beach. Her activities at Balboa Park were especially significant because she leased 30 acres of the park from the City of San Diego on the condition that she plant 300 trees within the park as well as 100 trees per year for the following 10 years within the

City of San Diego. Of equal importance was her activity within the field of horticulture in both writing and teaching. In 1915, she was also appointed supervisor of agriculture and landscaper for the San Diego schools. Kate became a nationally known leader in her field for which she was duly noted by her peers.

Her work in Balboa Park is probably her most famous accomplishment in the eyes of the public. Most of the trees she planted still exist, which changed the original look of the park from coastal scrub to areas of forested grandeur. Kate received many honors during her life and was recently memorialized with a bronze statue of her likeness in Balboa Park - in 1998. The 79-acre Kate O. Sessions Memorial Park in northern San Diego also honors her memory. Kate's unofficial but enduring title is "The Mother of Balboa Park." Never married, Kate died in San Diego on March 24, 1940.

Meanwhile, back in Oakland, California, Josiah Sessions began a life of relative retirement starting in the mid 1870s, shortly after his failed mineral water venture when he sold off his large holdings of equine stock. The 1880 U.S. census lists Sessions as an unemployed "Agriculturist," implying that he was enjoying retirement. By early 1895, Josiah's wife, Harriet, experienced declining health and decided to move to San Diego with her daughter with the hope of being reinvigorated by the change of climate. On May 1, 1895, Harriet died in San Diego at her daughter's residence. (6) With his own family members living in the San Diego area, Josiah sold his Oakland property and moved to San Diego to be with his son and daughter, Kate. He enjoyed the last six years of his life in San Diego and died there on March 14, 1903. (7) Josiah, along with Harriet, Kate, Frank and his wife, Katherine, are buried together in a family plot at Mount Hope Cemetery in San Diego.



The author standing next to a slightly larger than life bronze statue of Kate O. Sessions, daughter of Josiah Sessions, at Balboa Park, San Diego, California.



This simple granite grave stone in Mount Hope Cemetery, San Diego, California, marks the final resting place of Josiah Sessions, California pioneer and proprietor of Vernon Mineral Water.

6. San Diego Union, May 2, 1895

7. San Francisco Chronicle, March 14, 1903