

Fires and family life at the Water Works

By Jerry Bowen

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Some of the most interesting local history comes from the people who lived it. Last year, during the Solano County Historical Society's Pioneer Days Celebration, I was very fortunate to meet Betty Davis who lives in Fairfield. While we were talking, she asked me if I would be interested in a family history that was written by her mother, Edith Lucille Venning.

Of course I was interested. When she handed me the document that she had meticulously compiled of her mother's writings it surprised me because of the size of it: 60 pages!

When I got home, I started reading it and couldn't put it down until I had read it from beginning to end. I asked Betty for permission to use some of it in my column and she agreed. Of course, with 60 pages, I had to condense it to a small, pertinent portion - a little history of the early days of Fairfield and the Fairfield Water Works will be the primary focus of this column in two parts.

Edith Venning wrote a summary of the early days of Fairfield/Suisun before she launched into her family history that was so well done that, for today, I will use her narrative just as she wrote it. It reveals many details not normally recorded for history about the times as she experienced them in turn-of-the-century Fairfield/Suisun. Without further delay, here is her summary:

"When I was a child there was a slough that ran up between Fairfield and Suisun and under Union Avenue. There was a wooden bridge over the slough on Union Avenue at this point. I can remember the wheels of the buggy going bumpity-bump over the boards as my mother pushed it along with my baby brother in it. I remember her hurrying me along because I was afraid I would fall between the cracks of the boards and land in the water below. Of course the cracks were only a couple of inches wide.

"Captain Waterman laid out Fairfield in a perfect square from Illinois Street on the north and from Pennsylvania Avenue on the west to Washington Street on the east. Everything else was grain fields and pasture. Broadway is extra wide because it was supposed to have been the main street. Most of the houses were small frame houses with fences around them and many with horse beans and garlic growing in the front yards. There were a few big two-story New England-type houses built by people with money. Most of them occupied a whole block each, with horse and cow barns,

windmills and tank houses. They usually had gardens and trees and also white picket fences. The streets were unpaved and if there were sidewalks they were wooden. The streets were ankle-deep in mud in the winter and ankle-deep in dust in summer.

“About the time I was in grammar school they paved a strip down the middle of each street wide enough for two cars to pass. There were still no sidewalks and everyone walked in the streets. It was not until Roosevelt started his P.W.A. (Public Works Administration) projects during the depression that they built sidewalks. People used to pasture their cows between the pavement and the fences. On good years the wild oats were waist high in the streets.

“Fire was an ever-present hazard. Frame dwellings, old barns and high grass caught easily and burned fiercely. The fire department was an all-volunteer force. Suisun was burned out completely several times. When I lived at the Water Works, we ticked off the old barns as they burned and drew a sigh of relief when they were finally all out of the way. I remember seeing three houses burn all at once on a windy spring night. One caught fire from the other and flames roared skyward.

About WW-I the highway came through on Texas Street. That is why it turned out to be the business street. Up until then, you had to go to Suisun to buy anything but a few groceries. In 1921 there was a grocery store (25 foot frontage), a meat market, a bakery, a drug store, a hardware store, a bank, a hotel, an ice cream parlor, a barbershop and post office and two bars, all on the north side of the 700 and 800 blocks of Texas Street. Nobody would start a store on the south side of the street.

They said people would not cross the street to trade. “There were two garages and four service stations on the south side of the street. There were two homes in the 800 block and one in the 700 block. The first picture show was built about that time. “The population was about 1,500. When we first went to live and work at the waterworks, we had 300 meters. That was in 1929.

“We had no police department. After the highway went through town, they hired a motorcycle policeman. The first one I remember was a cycle-mad young man who pulled so many wild capers that he did not last long. After that, Mr. McNery had the job for some years. James Brennan had it next. They gave Jim a car, an office and a desk. And when he quit, he joined the Army at the very beginning of WW-II and died at Corregidor.

“Howard Yatsie had the job next. He kept the car but gave up the office and took the desk out to the water works for us to use when we made up water bills. “A man named Rex Clift took the job next and organized our first real police force.” With that summary done, Edith decided to write her family history using family photo albums to recall the

many details.

Edith was born on Sept. 23, 1903, to Charles and Cora Stewart in Fairfield, and lived in a house that once stood on the corner of Texas and Webster streets. The house later was moved to Empire Street in the 1920s. Over the years, they moved to a ranch halfway between Mankas Corners and Rockville known as the Davisson Place and later the Roberts Place. Later moves included Vallejo and Santa Rosa and Upper Lake near Clear Lake and back to Santa Rosa. In 1914, Edith's father got a job with Pacific Gas & Electric Co. and the family moved to Oakland, then to San Leandro, back to Oakland and finally to Suisun Valley in 1921.

During a trip to Fairfield in 1920, when Edith was 16 years old, she met the man of her dreams who would become her husband, Ray Venning. They married Sept. 21, 1921, and settled for a short time on the ranch in Suisun Valley with Ray's brother and father in a three-room cabin.

After several more moves, they moved into the Reed Apartments in 1925 on the corner of Madison and Kentucky streets. In 1927, Fairfield began experiencing a building boom while Ray was working for the Evans and Pyle Hardware Store. Their life was about to become more settled and permanent when City Councilman John Frietas offered Ray a job with the Fairfield/Suisun Water Works.

Edith summarized that part of their life by writing, "My husband was hired to run the water works in October 1929. He was the only water department employee on a regular basis at that time. He pumped the water, laid mains, repaired leaks, repaired meters, collected bad bills and was supposed to make the water bills, but usually conned me into doing that."

The rest of the story will be the subject of the second part of this article when we will learn a lot of details about the early Fairfield Water Works under the guidance of the Vennings.

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