

## Life flowed on at the Fairfield waterworks

By Jerry Bowen

Sunday, February 27, 2005

Before I get into the meat of this column, I need to correct a mistake I made in the first segment. In the column I spelled Ms. Venning's middle name as "Lucille." It is spelled "Lucile."

At the time we ended the segment, the Vennings had moved in 1925 into the Reed Apartments on the corner of Madison and Kentucky streets in Fairfield.

They finally were able to rent and move into a house on Broadway Street. The house wasn't much and was poorly laid out for having such a large family living in it. Across the back was a screened porch and kitchen pantry; next to that was the dining room with a bath at the end of it. Ray, Edith and their two children had to sleep in what was supposed to be the dining room while Grandpa Venning and a 5-year-old slept in the tiny bedroom. Across the street, to the east, was the house where Edith had been born about 25 years earlier.

Ray got a steady job working with Duff Erickson as a plumber's helper at the Evans and Pyle Hardware Store, making about \$100 a month. It was a fairly decent pay, but even with a rent of only \$16 a month they were still just barely able keep their heads above water.

During the last summer they lived there, they had a plague of mosquitoes. It was so bad that a person would be completely enveloped in a cloud of them anytime they went outside. Edith recalled that "people stood in the stores downtown, stamping their feet to discourage them while they shopped. Even with screens on the windows, some got in, so we swatted constantly, even in the house. They were so bad that I hung my wash in the screen porch, rather than go out for a few minutes." Then, Edith came down with malaria to add to their woes.

Fairfield began experiencing a building boom in 1927 and in 1929, City Councilman John Frietas, offered Ray a job at the Fairfield/Suisun Waterworks. The offer included pay of \$125 per month plus housing, lights and water. He was to replace a man who had a rather quarrelsome disposition who caused too many problems and was starting fights with customers.

Ray liked his job as plumber's helper and Edith recollected, "To me, so tired of juggling the budget, this sounded heavenly. On the other hand, Ray liked the job he

had, although he realized we needed the money. We talked it over carefully, and finally decided to try it, saying that if we did not like it, we could always try something else. I still don't know whether we did the right thing or not. The job turned out to have all sorts of hidden tensions we knew nothing about in advance. Right or wrong, it was what we did, and I never could get Ray to hunt for another job, even when at times, he seemed to be about to explode with tension. One reason for this I know was that as soon as the thing was settled, the man who had quit the job, swore he would make Ray sorry he ever took the job. After that, no one could ever have dislodged him (Ray), and nothing did."

They moved to the waterworks in October 1929. The house on Waterworks Lane, now Canova Lane, was even worse than the one they left. In Edith's memoirs she said, "The house was a patched up old shack. No room was more than ten feet wide, none more than thirteen feet long. It was the dirtiest mess I had ever seen. Ray went into it with a hose and a broom. I came along after him with Clorox. Then we moved. I spent twenty-five years scrubbing, patching and rearranging to try to fit us into the mold of that shack. In any degree that I succeeded, Ray was very proud. In the degree that I failed, I was discontented. Many things happened there." To top it all off, they had no furniture and had to rely on in-laws discards for a time.

The job kept Ray busier than he had ever been before. Since he was the only water department employee on a regular basis at that time, he pumped the water, laid the mains, repaired leaks, repaired meters, collected bad bills and was supposed to put together the water bills, but managed to get Edith to take over that chore. It was definitely a handful for the young couple. Their first year, 1929-1930, was eventful to say the least. Their daughter came down with scarlet fever, and shortly after recovering, came down with rheumatic fever.

Then Armijo High School caught fire. Ray sped to the scene in his pickup to see how much water the firemen would need and turned on every pump and valve available. The building was damaged enough that classes had to be held in the old Fireman's Hall the rest of the year while damages were repaired. During an extremely hot spell in 1930 Ray was kept hopping, trying to keep enough water available in the tanks.

In 1931, more problems cropped up. In August, a car hit the city's pickup Ray was driving. He was thrown into a patch of sharp gravel alongside a fire hydrant. His head was cut, his legs were badly scraped and he had a broken arm. Edith recalled that "... the arm swelled and hurt so badly, that I had to send for the doctor, who had set it. He came to the house, an old man, and very shaky, and loosened the splints. He also dressed Ray's scraped leg. In cutting the dressing off he dug the point of his shears into the sore place. I wanted to hit him when he said, 'It doesn't hurt, I can't feel it.' I thought sarcastically, 'Very Funny!' "

Ray was on the job at the time, so he went on compensation, while his boss's son carried on for him. Six weeks later, when they took the splints off, Ray's arm was crooked and he could not use it. In loosening the splints, the old doctor had let the bones slip out of place.

The insurance company sent Ray to Sacramento to a bone specialist. They operated on his arm, and kept him running back and forth for treatments for months. Besides having the arm operated on twice, he had his tonsils out. It was 11 months and two weeks from the time he was hurt, until he went back to work again full time on Aug. 1, 1932.

That same year, while City Councilman Bickford was serving as the Water Commissioner, it was decided to drill a deep well and to put up a big 100,000-gallon tank a hundred feet in the air to supply more pressure in the lines. The idea was to go down below the brackish slough water and to seal off any water coming in from the higher strata, pumping only fresh water from 1,000 feet below the surface.

The bond issue was voted and passed. The contracts were awarded for both jobs and they brought in a big well-drilling outfit and set it up outside Edith's bedroom window. It ran 24 hours a day except for an hour's break at noon and at midnight for servicing the machinery. Finally, they reached 1,000 feet and they said there was water there.

The contract had called for a 6-inch bore and was to be reamed out if there was water; then a steel casing was to be inserted and concrete was to be poured between the casing and wall of the well theoretically to seal off any brackish water. The hole was reamed to proper size, but when they poured the concrete, the casing collapsed. They drilled down through the concrete, but when they were through and brought up some of the water, it was as salty as any ocean. No one could bear to swallow it.

They had no water, but they still had a contract for the Dixie Pipe and Tank Company to erect a 100,000-gallon tank.

The building of the tank was absolutely fascinating to Edith. "I still remember the day the crew got in town. To my husband fell the job of helping them find rooms and boarding places. However, the very first thing they wanted was some place to buy whiskey. They never drank anything else. This was during prohibition, but Ray had no trouble acquainting them with a local bootlegger.

"One of the men was an old sailor with an old-fashioned peg leg, and it was a sight to see him climb around that tank and frame. The tank and frame was a sort of pre-fab job, and only took a few days to build, but I spent most of that time with my head out of the window, afraid I would miss something. When the frame was up and the tank itself

being put together, it was riveted and was very noisy.

“We went away for a weekend. Ray made home-brew beer in those days. There was some brewing in the crock. We figured it would be about ready to bottle when we got home. When we did get home, the crock was nearly empty. The old sailor had drunk it, raw and fermenting, right out of the crock. They told us that when he had drank all that he could hold he went out and lay down cross-wise on a timber that was part of a tank support. When someone found him there sound asleep, and rescued him, his back was nearly broken.”

All this time Ray's arm was, first in splints, then in a cast, but he remained in on everything that was happening.

Well, there is so much more to this story and I'm pressing my luck with the length of this article today so I better stop here. The two-part article is now going to grow to three parts.

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