

Vallejo's Annie Lizzie Gill was a pioneer activist

By Jerry Bowen

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As I start this series of columns, I have absolutely no idea on how many installments it will take to finish the story of a remarkable lady that lived in Vallejo, Annie Lizzie Gill who was born in 1863 on a farm outside the town of Oblong, Ill. Her story is a wonderful cavalcade of events and personal anecdotes before arriving in Vallejo in 1918, but since this is a local history column, I'll stick mostly to her life here in Solano County.

I was lucky enough to buy a copy of her memoirs, "From Ox carts to Airplanes," a few years ago and just recently began reading the refreshingly no-nonsense story of her life.

Annie was 80 years old in 1943, when she began writing her memoir, and, in the forward, she stated, "Although I was named by my parents 'Annie Lizzie (Moody),' the name must have seemed too far-fetched to be true for County Recorders who invariably copied it, Anna Lizzie."

Over the years Annie lived in Denver, Colo., Oneida, Kan., and Walton, Fla., before moving to California. Annie wasn't very generous with dates in her book, but it appears she and her husband Howard left Florida by train in the winter of 1918. The train was crowded with servicemen heading to their assignments during World War I.

It was interesting to note that the coal-burning engine was not allowed to enter St. Louis because of "smoke nuisance." It had to remain outside of town while an electric engine came and coupled up to the train and pulled it into town.

It was winter and the town was enveloped in a freezing blizzard when they arrived.

People were freezing in the streets. The walk up a long stairs and crossing Eads Bridge to the station in the nasty weather was a major change from the balmy weather of Florida.

She remarked, "When we did reach the station, it was filled with a milling crowd which, I suppose, had come in to escape the cold. We were jostled around in a cold in that melee for what seemed like hours. Every seat was full." Finally, their new train connection was made up and they were able to continue an uneventful trip to California.

Anna's husband Howard had arranged to stay with old friends, Mr. and Mrs. Howard Jones ahead of time.

The only requirement was that they must stay with them for at least six months so they could enjoy each other's company.

Vallejo, with 12,000 people, was bursting at the seams with servicemen and their families. People were sleeping in the Salvation Army halls, in the corridors of local hotels, in tents and in cars.

The promise to stay for six months would have to be broken soon when Mrs. Jones's mother passed away in Sacramento and they would have to move her father into their Vallejo home.

Howard spent a day walking all over town, hunting for a new place to rent. But, everywhere they went empty places were already rented as soon as someone moved out. Foundations for new houses were being laid but once again they were already sold.

Home Acres development was in its infancy when they came across a sign proclaiming, "Buy acreage. Have a cow and chickens." Lots were broken up into parcels of from one and a quarter to 14 acres and was an ideal area for people used to living in urban areas.

They selected a two-acre parcel and paid a deposit on it. All streets in Home Acres were named after the first person to build on it. There was a house nearby owned by a Mr. Taylor, so the street was named Taylor Street.

Small houses were being built all over the area, even though there were no utilities installed at the time, so the residents formed the Home Acres Improvement Association.

It was the beginning of a long activist role by Annie Gill in the area.

I'll continue this series in my next column.

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