

Making a life in Vallejo wasn't easy for the Gills

By Jerry Bowen

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When I started this story two weeks ago I made a whopper of a mistake when I said, "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. If I was a politician I guess I could say I "misspoke" but truth is always better.

In fact, it was Annie's son Howard who had earlier moved Annie and her husband Newton to Vallejo to work at the then thriving Mare Island Shipyard during WW-I. Another son, Homer, followed soon after.

Now back to the story. The Gills' began building their home in May of 1918. The first project was to dig a cellar for the house. Newton and Howard worked eight hours a day at Mare Island and then hand dig the cellar until it was too dark to work. Annie was always there while they dug, taking shelter from the cold wind from the Straits under a lean-to that Newton built out of carpet and poles. By June 1, they had the basement finished, the foundation in and sub-floor laid.

Building materials were scarce so progress on the building of their home was slow. On June 27, they had to move out of the Jones's home, and the only place they could go was to their incomplete home.

They built a fireplace into a dirt bank in the house, got their walls and roof on and moved in. They boarded up the empty window frames, and hung blankets over the door spaces. Blankets were hung from the framing throughout the house to separate the structure into rooms. A chemical toilet served as the bathroom. It was cold and crude, but it was home!

In order to for the men to be able to continue to work until midnight they bought a Rochester kerosene lamp. Rochester lamps were the best you could buy because of the amount of light it gave. It had four wicks placed in a circular pattern instead of one flat wick and was generally a cherished item until Edison's electric lights spelled its end.

Annie continued to cook on the makeshift fireplace until a flue was installed in the partially built home. She bought a secondhand stove and burned scraps of wood in it to cook and heat the cold house a little.

With no power, no water, no gas, no sewage disposal and no deliveries of any kind the newly formed Home Acres Improvement Association went to work. After much pleading and sweet-talking the Great Western Power Company brought electricity to the area. Soon after came the fight with the Vallejo Gas and Electric Company to supply gas.

Annie described Vallejo as, " ... a hick town, run by old fogies who thought that Vallejo business houses would suffer by having the suburbs improved. They even fought our trying to get rural mail service. We had to rent boxes at the post office, as they figured that we would spend money in town." The Association wrote to Washington and an inspector was sent out to check on the problem. They got their rural service.

Many of the folks building homes at Home Acres had children. So, of course, the need for a school was on the agenda. The Vallejo School Board promised they would provide a teacher if they built a school. Here's where the folks in the past showed their commitment to get things done. The Association bought a surplus school building, dismantled it themselves and rebuilt in on donated a 100-foot square parcel.

But with thirty-five school-age children and a schoolhouse in place, the Vallejo School Board broke their promise. No teacher was provided as promised.

I'll continue this story in my next column.

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