Starting an orchard barely panned out for Gills

By Jerry Bowen

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In my last column, the Home Acres Improvement Association failed to get the teacher promised by the Vallejo School Board even though they had obtained a building for a school.

With a public building in hand, the Home Acres Association decided not to let it go to waste and decided to use it as a clubhouse, where they could assemble and raise money for needed local improvements.

Annie Lizzie Gill served as Chairman of the Card Party Committee for the next 11 years, arranging for card parties, chicken suppers, dances and masquerade parties.

Not one to let the grass grow under her feet, she described how she, "... wore a groove in the City Hall begging for water."

The Gills expanded their property by purchasing an additional four acres. They laid out 22 lots but couldn’t sell them without water on each parcel. With no action from the city of Vallejo, they ran pipes from their well (what is today Gillcrest Street) to supply the lots. Of course, that caused new problems when some of the owners used more than their share of water, consequently draining their tank.

But Annie didn’t give up. She hounded the Vallejo Water Department until they finally gave in and extended the main line to include the Gillcrest subdivision.

During the winter of 1918-1919, the men decided to start a family orchard to supply their needs and to make a little extra money. The first attempt was disastrous. They encountered what Annie called “plow-sole,” created by conventional plowing that forms a hardpan just below the zone disturbed by tillage. The hardpan reduces crop yields and must be shattered, allowing water to be stored in and below the shattered zone for later crops. So they resorted to blasting holes. Unfortunately, all it did was create a pocket that prevented the tree roots from penetrating any deeper. Most of the trees died.

Not being the type to give up, they decided to buy four acres across from their home in Vallejo that didn’t have any problems.

But trouble always seemed to come in bunches. As soon as the trees began to show
some promise, dairy cattle, belonging to a neighbor, broke down the fence and nipped the tops off. A furious Annie Gill tried to corral the intruding bovine, but the neighbor arrived and tried to stampede them out of the corral so he wouldn't have to pay damages.

A quick visit to the local pound master, another well-known Vallejo figure by the name of “Deafy Derrick,” took immediate action. According to Annie, “... he got his rifle and held it on the dairyman until he paid twenty dollars damages.” He then told Annie, “If it happened again, to threaten to shoot his cattle and they wouldn't need to call him again but could collect damages on the spot.”

Later, when the fruit trees were old enough to bear fruit, the orchard across the street produced a bumper crop of apricots before a thief harvested most of the crop in the dead of night.

Sadly, Annie’s husband, Newton, was killed on Jan. 22, 1924, by a fall. Homer, the Gills’ second son, then left home to see the world, leaving just her and No. 1 son, Howard, to carry on with the future.