

Annie Lizzie Gill: A pioneer in every sense

By Jerry Bowen

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In my last column, we left off with Annie Lizzie Gill's husband, Newton, dying on Jan. 22, 1924, by a fall. Then her youngest son, Homer, left home to see the world by working on ships, leaving just her and No. 1 son, Howard, to carry on with the future.

To help his mother, Howard took Annie on a trip to Yosemite. Of course, in those days, trips by auto included bad roads and tire blowouts. Annie remembered that trip as four-blowouts long. Over the ensuing years, Howard and Annie took many trips to explore California.

Backing up a little, Annie was present for the launching of the battleship California on Nov. 20, 1919. Her description of the runaway launching gives us a good perspective of what it was like. " when the government awarded the building of the battleship California to Mare Island, San Francisco (who felt they should have the prime shipyard in the Bay Area) was sure it couldn't be done; and even if it could be constructed, it couldn't be launched, because the channel was too narrow. They prophesied that, when launched, it would plow right up Georgia Street " She went on to describe the well-known launching; "I could hear the pilings on the ferry slip snap like matchsticks."

Hunters Point was eventually awarded a shipyard later.

Life took a smoother path over the years until two days before the bombing of Pearl Harbor. She fell and broke her right arm, which resulted in a cast from her neck to her waist. As was typical of her often-humorous outlook on life, she went on to say, "If I had been given a torch, I might have passed for the Statue of Liberty."

During the war years, Howard continued to work at Mare Island. At the age 52, he resigned, knowing that he couldn't draw his pension for another 10 years.

After that, he and Annie traveled the West. They bought a home at Mokelumne Hill, in California's Gold Country in 1952.

In her autobiography, "From Ox Carts to Airplanes," Annie described how she started writing it at the age of 80. At the time, she had no idea she would live to be 100. It began as a "memo" for her younger relatives, whose lives were so different that stories of her childhood experiences sounded like fiction.

Over her years in Vallejo, she participated in many activities, including the Eastern Star, Vallejo Women's Club, Rose Society and the Ruggers.

She also became well known for doll-making, a result of working in a doll factory in her earlier years. She had made a doll replica of every American first lady, from Martha Washington to Jacqueline Kennedy, and displayed them at benefits and special programs.

In 1963, the Vallejo Times-Herald honored her with a brief story of her life when she turned 100.

If you get a chance, get a copy of the book. I bet that most of you will truly enjoy a great read and appreciate life just a little more.

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