

## **Meet Cleo Gordon Elementary school's namesake**

**By Nancy Dingler**

Friday, December 22, 2000

Have you ever wondered how local places, like streets and schools get their names? For example, it is obvious that Fairfield High is named after the town, but did you know that Armijo High was named after the family that had the large Spanish land grant it sits on? Historically, people want to honor prominent, successful people by naming places for them.

In Fairfield there are several schools named after teachers. In the lobby of Cleo Gordon Elementary is a prominent picture of its namesake.

But few people in the school district know anything about Cleo Gordon, the devoted teacher. They knew she was a remarkable teacher, who students admired, some adored and whenever they could, they would return home to visit with Mrs. Gordon. So began my hunt for the "real" Cleo Gordon.

Cleo was born in San Francisco in 1894. Her full name was Clelia Anita Lepori. Her father owned a hotel in San Francisco and the Vichy Springs in Napa. She had two siblings, a brother, August, and a sister, Virginia. Their mother passed away while the children were quite young, and their father, in his grief, moved the family to Napa.

Approximately 1911 or 1912, she attended San Francisco Normal School, which later would become San Francisco State College, and that is where she met Niles Chester Gordon, who was studying art. At age 19, in 1913, she began her first teaching job in Gordon Valley. She began an illustrious teaching career that spanned 50 years. She taught in the Petaluma and Napa School Districts, as well as Rockville and Fairfield.

From the time she met her future husband, until their marriage, it had been 17 years. They had a very long courtship. Part of the reason for such a long wait could have been financial considerations. Niles had the daunting task of tending the ranch for his widowed mother and possibly that is why they waited. One can speculate as to the whys and wherefores of such a lengthy betrothal, but one thing is undeniable and that is their love. They stayed true to each other over the years, promising to marry when it was appropriate.

Niles was born in 1895 in Gordon Valley. His great-grandfather was William Gordon of early California fame. His father, George Gordon, died while Niles was attending San Francisco Normal School. Cutting short his education, he returned home to help his

mother. Niles developed the Gordon Valley "flavorated" grapes, which put the region on the produce map. He still pursued his art, even if he could not find the time to attend a formal school.

Upon their marriage in 1930, Cleo stopped teaching. She did return to teaching in 1939, taking a post at the old Fairfield Elementary School. Niles purchased a house on Empire Street where he and Cleo resided. They were warm, generous and gracious people who opened their home to the teaching staff, as well as students, neighbors and friends. At least once a year they would have a big party at the ranch for everyone in the school district. Cleo and Niles spent their summers around Lake Shasta. They invited friends and students up for the weekends.

As much as the couple loved to be surrounded by Cleo's students, there was a vacancy in their personal lives, in that they never were able to have children of their own.

Tragedy struck Niles shortly after they were married. He was diagnosed with prostate cancer, which moves slowly, but insidiously. In the meanwhile, in 1941, the year of the start of World War II, Cleo joined the staff at the county office of education. Obviously, being away from the children was more than she could bear, for the following year she went back to teaching, this time in Rockville. In 1944, she returned to Fairfield, where she remained until she retired in the late '60s. The school was dedicated in her name in 1966.

Cleo lost the love of her life in July of 1953. Niles succumbed to his 20-year battle with cancer. Cleo never remarried. She joined Niles in March of 1975. You can find their grave in the Gordon family plot at the old Rockville Cemetery. They are buried side by side under a grave marker shaped like an open book.

Downloaded from the Solano History Database

<http://www.solanohistory.org/428>

<http://articles.solanohistory.net/428/>