

Farmer, columnist Wood Young kept history alive

By Nancy Dingler

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Every once in a while a person comes along who is so persuasive and personable they can inspire others to see their vision. Wood Young was such a person.

Without his vision, there is a real possibility the creation of the Solano County Historical Society might not have come about. Wood's knowledge of Solano County history was legend. Known for being shy and self-effacing, he nevertheless shared his passion for local history.

Young wrote a book on the old Pena Adobe in Vacaville, which became the catalyst for preserving the structure. He also wrote an extensive article about the Rockville Chapel, documenting the historic occasions and people who established the cemetery and chapel and then why it fell to disuse.

As a consequence, the old chapel was saved and dedicated as an historic structure. Wood Young wanted history, its people and buildings, saved for future generations, so they might know the why, how and who were involved.

Wood was born Nov. 16, 1891, at Birds Landing, to Edward A. and Lulu W. Young. He spent a happy childhood on his father's farm. Wood attended Willow Springs Grammar School. He would take delight in relating, years later, how his most vivid memories of school involved Ole Olson, a close friend.

It seems Ole set a dubiously cherished record of 14 whippings in a single day. Ole later would grow up to become one of Solano County's most respected law officers.

In 1907, after the completion of grammar school, Wood traveled via paddlewheel steamer down the Sacramento River to San Francisco, where he attended the California School of Mechanical Arts (called the Lick High School after James Lick who endowed the school, as well as the Observatory on Mount Hamilton). Wood observed the streets of San Francisco were still littered with the remnants of the great quake.

After an apprentice course in high school mechanical drawing, Wood decided he wanted to be an engineer. He entered the University of California in 1912. While attending the university, he became a cub reporter for the Daily Californian.

During summer break from his first year at university, Wood returned to the farm at

Birds Landing to discover the farming business had been bad.

He had to stay and work on the ranch. He learned to drive eight mules with a single line. He also learned tending a team this large meant going to bed early so he could get up at 4:30 a.m. to care for the mules and get them harnessed for a day of working in the fields.

By the end of the year, it looked like the farm was beginning to do better. Wood could have returned to university but "storm clouds of war were beginning to threaten," he said, so he decided to work another year on the farm.

To travel from the ranch house to the batch camp, Wood bought a cut down topless car, which because it had no windshield required the driver to wear goggles. He dubbed the car "Helen Blazes." He cut the eight miles from home to the camp into a quick trip.

"This didn't go over very well with the horse drawn traffic, as Helen Blazes wore no muffler," he said.

When World War I involved the U.S., his brother, Vernon Wood, enlisted, but Young received a draft exemption to work on the farm. His father was in his 70s, which meant running the farm fell to Wood.

Attorney Joseph M. Raines, who later played another role in the life of Wood Young, prepared his exemption papers.

"In the war years, wheat was profitable and needed. The farmer graduated from a 'Hay Seed' to a respected citizen," Wood wrote.

Shortly thereafter, the Caterpillar tractor appeared. Young bought a used 60-horsepower Best tractor which was wrecked almost immediately. The tractor became unhooked from the plows and ran away down a steep hill, jamming the radiator beneath the engine, as it landed in a ditch. The driver of the tractor was excited because the tractor "had no horn, no brakes, and when I jumped she was making 20 miles per hour!"

When Vernon returned from France, the two brothers worked the ranch together, but by 1929 the need for wheat fell, along with the stock market. The brothers were desperate to find a means to make a living during the subsequent depression. They decided to try the insurance business. While looking around for an office, attorney Rains told them, "Use mine."

To get the insurance business on its feet, Wood rang doorbells, turned grindstones and

helped herd sheep. The brothers still farmed on the side. The first year they grossed \$600.

Banks were in desperate straights, what with the defaulted loans. Congress enacted the Federal Land Banks to help farmers keep their land and stay off relief. Wood Young was named local agent for Land Bank Commission loans. Shortly thereafter, he was named secretary of the Solano County Association of the Federal Land Bank of Berkeley, a position he held for 30 years.

"The next major break in my life," Wood explained in an interview, "was when I married August Tomasini in 1935 and became the stepfather of three fine children.

Between the growing insurance business and his wife's "glorious" attitude, Wood Young weathered the Depression.

World War II brought a shortage of manpower, so Wood Young served on many community projects. Among these was the gas-rationing board. By 1948 Wood began serving as secretary and then treasurer of the Solano Irrigation District. He remained in that capacity until 1958.

By 1952 his farming days ended. He pursued other interests, including treasurer and director of InterCommunity Hospital from 1955 until 1960. He began contributing stories to the Solano County Historian and writing, on a regular basis, historical columns for the Daily Republic.

The remaining historic buildings in Solano County, particularly in and around Fairfield, lost a champion when Wood died July 19, 1984.

His vision to preserve Solano County history lives today among the members of the historical society, museums and genealogical groups who are loosely banded together to preserve yesterday for future generations.

SPECIAL NOTE: The destruction of the old county hospital was very sad. Let's not allow the same fate to befall the old library and the statue of Chief Solano. When these historic structures are gone, they are gone. They cannot be restored, only pictures remain. It is hardly a legacy that should be left to all the future generations to come.

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