

Rulofson: curator of Vacaville's Pena Adobe

By Nancy Dingler

Saturday, August 21, 2004

Shortly after the 1849 California gold rush, the business of mining changed from individuals seeking their fortune and swarming all over the Sierra Nevada to large corporate mining companies, usually funded by Eastern financiers.

That change brought about the way gold was to be taken out of the mountains.

Instead of panning in the streams and rivers and setting up sluice boxes to trap the increasingly elusive precious metal, the big corporations went into "hard-rock mining" - in that they had tunnels and shafts on a massive scale dug out or they turned to hydraulics.

Monitors were brought in. They looked like fire-hose nozzles on steroids. Held in place by massive wooden structures, the monitors were capable of washing away whole mountains, sending the washed out ore downstream, to be sent through crushing machines called stamp mills.

There was a constant earthshaking din as these stamp mills operated 24/7. The scale of the hydraulic operation was so huge that the debris from the operation raised the level of the rivers flowing into Sacramento. That meant in the winter, Sacramento suffered terrible floods. Finally, a stop to the hydraulic mining was legislated.

Rodney Rulofson was born in Angels Camp in 1901 and lived there until his early teens. Later, he would go on to have a 35-year career with PG&E. In 1939 he married Edna C. Dugan in Calaveras County. The union produced a son, Myron and a stepson, Russell Dugan.

After retirement, Rulofson became curator of Vacaville's Pena Adobe. The adobe had been preserved and restored in the early 1960s by members of the Solano County Historical Society and Sons of the Golden West, along with many other associations, groups and private individuals. A museum was established, and with it, an agreement with the city of Vacaville, to procure a curator.

In an interview with Bob Allen of the Vacaville Heritage Council in 1972, shortly before his death, Rulofson told a story about the monitors use after the hydraulic operation shut down: "After hydraulic mining was outlawed, they brought in the monitors that looked like a big hose nozzle only they were about 6 or 8 feet long.

"They brought them in (to Angels Camp) and set them up on platforms in different places around town. In case of fire, the volunteer fire department would climb up on that platform and aim the monitor in the general direction of the fire and they would open the valve. The stream of water would go at least two blocks if necessary.

"I remember one of the few times I ever saw it used in my youth. The fire bell rang and I along with some other boys my age were up at the theater about a block from the firehouse.

"We heard the fire bell and rushed down just in time to see the volunteer fire department mount the platform and aim the monitor across the main street. The jailhouse was on the other side of the street right behind the firehouse, and a prisoner (there was only one cell and it was built of redwood) had set fire to it.

"Well, the effort was to put the fire out behind the firehouse, but they couldn't see the jail. They had to estimate the aim. When the first water arched out across the main street it struck the steeple of the firehouse and knocked it off, bell and all. From then on there was a flood over the back end and behind the jail. It flooded two stores next to the firehouse. The prisoner, he probably escaped drowning."

Rulofson was a keen observer and loved history. Throughout his life, he recorded the passage of time with his camera. The Vacaville Heritage Council has been the lucky recipient of the Rulofson collection.

Rulofson came by photography naturally. His dad's father, Hermann, was a famed San Francisco photographer and was in partnership for many years with Bradley. Some of the best known photos of dignitaries and well-known San Francisco sites of the 1860s and '70s were recorded by Bradley and Rulofson.

His mother's father was Marlin Hollingsworth Reed, who founded the Mountain Echo newspaper in Angels Camp.

Rulofson's dad (James) ". . . was kind of a 'man about town' in San Francisco, quite a sport. He was apparently licking at the wine a little too often, so his mother who had come from the Morgan family, my other grandmother of Sonora, brought him up to Angels Camp to get him away from the influence of his companions of San Francisco.

"When he arrived in Angels Camp, he was the only young man in the town who owned a dress suit and a silk hat, a cane and spats and all those things; he was a sport, a dandy. But that didn't stop him. He voluntarily got a job working underground in the mine as a hard-rock miner. On the occasions in the town when there would be a dance or anything of that kind, he would be the only man who would be there in formal.

"In spite of that, the other men still considered him a 'macho hombre.' He was well liked and respected. The fact that he had been in the ring and sparred with Jim Corbett in his day didn't hurt his reputation. He was well liked and well admired. He was considered quite a 'catch' by the young women of the town. My mother was socially well up in the community.

"She's the winner and thought she was. She got my father. They were married (1899). Of course I was the only issue, myself."

Unfortunately, his parent's marriage did not last. Evidently James still liked "the grape" too much for Jessie. A bitter custody battle over the 5-year old Rulofson, culminated with a kidnapping by his father.

In a dramatic courthouse scene straight out of the tales of Solomon, the judge asked the youngster to choose which parent he wanted to be with. The toddler chose his mother. Years later, Rulofson would become reacquainted with his father, but they were never close. Rulofson spent his last few years bringing history alive. He died Sept. 28, 1975.

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