

Vacaville life in the '20s was picturesque

By Kristin Delaplane

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Roberta Gates Ormaas traces her Vacaville heritage back to the 1850s when both sets of grandparents settled on ranches. Her paternal grandparents had the G.M. Gates Ranch in Lagoon Valley. Her maternal grandfather, John Montgomery, was a Methodist minister and had a ranch where Monte Vista and Eldridge meet today. Ormaas grew up in Vacaville during the 1920s.

Though Ormaas lived in town with her family, many of her friends lived on ranches, and in summer Ormaas went out to the ranches to help with the harvest of the fruit trees.

Ormaas talked about the farmers' lives. "The ranches were pretty self-sufficient. Most of the ranchers raised a few hogs and maybe one or two sheep, and did their own butchering. Did their own smoking of hams and things like that. Raised vegetables, which were canned, and all the fruit was canned. You could do pretty well getting up an impromptu meal."

However, the farmers still had to come to town to buy their staples. "The farmers would come into town on Saturday night and buy staples: sugar, flour, and things like that. They hardly ever came to town except that once a week. Everything was open on Saturday night. You were always with someone; you weren't allowed out at night alone.

"I can remember them sitting at my uncle's store uptown with a great big stove in the back of the store on Saturday night, and there would be farmers sitting around there visiting while the wives would go around to the various stores, which were not very many."

Ormaas' uncle, who had the store, was named Sterling Dobbins. Today, what was once Dobbins' store is a bridal shop.

There were even sections of town that were a mystery for Ormaas. As children, they were not allowed to venture into Vacaville's Chinatown. "The Chinese were pretty much from Kendal Street. Sam Lum had a wonderful restaurant right on the corner, but that is about as far as I got. Up about a block from his restaurant were all these Chinese kind of flophouses.

During her youth, trips to San Francisco were not made with any regularity. The mode

of travel was either by car ferry from Benicia to Martinez and Vallejo to Crockett and there was also a passenger ferry from Vallejo to San Francisco. "It was quite an event to go to San Francisco or Oakland," said Ormaas.

"Sometimes, on weekends, there would be long lines for the car ferry. You'd have to sit there in your car and wait while a couple of ferries would come in and take the ones ahead of you. We usually took the ferry from Vallejo. People would line up there for miles on a weekend to get the ferry.

"A trip to San Francisco was hardly ever made in one day. People usually stayed overnight. From Vacaville, it would take two or three hours to get to San Francisco. You'd do your shopping and then it would take another two or three hours to come back."

Robert Gates, Ormaas' father, was employed as a dried-fruit buyer. The company he worked for had its offices in San Francisco and he would occasionally travel there, but he would take the passenger ferry from Vallejo.

Trips to Sacramento were also made, but those were usually for doctor appointments.

"Going to Sacramento shopping was not considered in the same category as going to San Francisco or Oakland and shopping. The only thing I can remember going to Sacramento for was doctors' appointments. You didn't have any doctors beyond just the country doctors here, so if you had to go for some special reason, they would send you to Sacramento. I guess the closest hospital was in Sacramento, too."

Otherwise, when people in Vacaville got sick, one of the local doctors was called and he would make a house call. This meant the doctors were often called in the middle of the night.

The home of her youth also became the home for her children. Ormaas and her husband moved into the Main Street home with their two children.

Ormaas described the house as she remembered it when she was growing up. "We had a parlor that was pretty well shut off. It had folding doors that closed it off from the rest of the house. It was too much house to heat in the wintertime and to cool in the summertime. We had a fireplace in the next room, which we used for a sitting room and a dining room. Then there was the kitchen and to the other side of it was a bedroom and the bath.

"In the back there was a screened-in porch that connected the kitchen to the bathroom. We had a room built on back there in later years. Upstairs there were three bedrooms.

We had no bathroom upstairs. There is now, of course.”

Ormaas finished school at the start of the Depression. “I completed high school in 1930. I think there were 34 in our graduation class. I went to the University of California at Berkeley.”

And it was during this time that Ormaas met her husband, Bjarne Ormaas. “My husband was from Norway. We met at the Auburn Ski Club. There were a bunch of us that used to go up there and ski in the wintertime.”

And Ormaas quit school to get married. “I almost finished at Berkeley, but then I got married. We lived in Auburn for a couple years and then we moved to Vacaville and my husband had a tailor shop at Mare Island. Then he opened a business, Vacaville Cleaners.”

By the time World War II came, the family included two children, Ann and Robert. “After they took out the trees, I remember they raised peas out there one year. I brought my daughter in a stroller - we walked from town out in the country to this place and picked fresh peas. We came and brought big bags full and took them home. They were so good.”

There was a shortage of schoolteachers, as the men were called to war, and the district was summoning up those who were qualified.

Ormaas stated, “There was a real shortage of teachers at that time, so anybody who had enough college units was hired on an emergency credential. I had enough college credit to qualify. The first year, I substituted and taught in the country schools down around the Suisun area.”

During this time she enrolled in California State University, Sacramento, and finished off her studies so that she was a fully accredited teacher. Then she started teaching permanently. Her first permanent job was at Ulatis and then Willis Jepson.

From teaching, Ormaas was approached by the district to organize the libraries for the schools. She explained why she was chosen: “I really was asked to do it, because there was nobody else in the district that they could use as the librarian. I was the only one that had any units in library science and the only units I had were ‘leisure time use of the library.’

“My office was at the district library. I went around to all the different elementary schools and organized their libraries and I had a high school library.” Eventually, Ormaas went back to school, got her credential in library science and took many

additional courses in library science.

Ormaas left the house on Main Street in 1988 to move into the house her daughter was selling. "My daughter and son-in-law owned this house and they wanted to sell it because they wanted to go into business up at Lake Tahoe. They weren't having any luck selling it. I used to love to come over here because it was so bright and airy. I thought, well why don't I buy it and sell this one." That house, the home Ormaas lives in today, is actually right in the area where her grandparents had their ranch, the Montgomery Ranch.

The Montgomery family brings us back to one of the best family stories. It was a fairly common practice in days past for visiting ministers to come to town, and this led to one of the family stories. Ormaas' aunt, her mother's sister, fell in love with a visiting minister around the turn of the century. The couple eloped, moved to San Francisco and had three children. Ormaas carried on with the story: "They got divorced eventually. He became well known on the streets of San Francisco as a street-corner evangelist. He had long white hair and wore white flowing robes and was an evangelist on the street corners of San Francisco."

Today Ormaas uses her talents and knowledge for the vast lending library housed by the Vacaville Heritage Council in the old Town Hall in downtown Vacaville.

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