

Putt, Putt, Putt And The Reporter Was Printed

By John Rico

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Frequently people ask me if I find it frustrating in my endeavors to offer this column every week, which I have been doing for several decades. Frankly, at times it does bring me to the brink of total blankness in my attempts to go into a subject which can be of interest to local readers.

Today's column is such a tirade. It's all about a hole in a ceiling. Who would ever think that a hole in a ceiling had merits enough to deserve a special column in The Reporter? But, believe it or not, this hole in the ceiling fits that description, and it so happens the famous hole is right here in The Reporter plant.

Today, all of us are somewhat spoiled. We have so many conveniences and gadgets which are operated by the simple push of a switch or inserting a plug into a wall socket, that we have come to accept all these favors as our way of life, and that's the way it has been for a long, long, time.

But let's go back to the early days when the Vacaville Reporter was founded in 1883. There was no electricity in Vacaville in those days, yet the early publishers of this newspaper managed to put into print the news about Vacaville and the surrounding territory.

With no electricity at hand, there was need for power to run the press, folder and two commercial presses in The Reporter plant, so the only source was a gas engine mounted on a stand. The hole in the ceiling was a vent to permit the fumes from the gas engine to escape through the ceiling and roof, and to keep one or two printers from being asphyxiated.

This was all before the days of the Environmental Protection Agency, and the mere fact that at least half of the fumes did remain in The Reporter plant, was of no serious consequences to anyone.

From this gas engine a belt ran a hodgepodge arrangement of pulleys and shafts, attached to the ceiling. By use of long belts and idling pulleys, the men running the machines could reach high and push the belt from an idling pulley to a drive gear, and secure the power needed. This was a day-in, day-out procedure, listening to squeaking pulleys, slapping belts, and the putt, putt, putt of the gasoline engine.

In the early 1890s men of vision promised a water and light system for the small town, and in 1892, a 30-hp steam engine, a boiler, and two generators were installed, and it was a gala day on that April 9, 1892, when a few business houses and homes were able to make use of the small amount of electricity generated by the crude plant. Disaster struck in the form of an earthquake on the morning of April 19, 1892, and practically all of the efforts put into the new electricity generating plant were ruined.

Under new management the Vacaville Water and Light Company was regrouped in 1902 and took advantage of the offer of the Yuba Electric and Power Company and the Bay Counties Power Company, to tie in a Vacaville electric line with the main lines of these companies running along the railroad tracks at Elmira.

As soon as this new line from Vacaville to Elmira was completed, a new era struck the community. There was electricity not only for The Reporter but for the Chandler Lumber Company. Out went the gas engines, and in came electric motors. Vacaville's streets could have larger light globes, and most homes in the community were offered the privilege of having the use of electricity. Some accepted; other rejected; preferring to stay with the old kerosene lamps.

Every time I note a new piece of sophisticated machinery added to The Reporter's inventory, I somehow go back and glance casually at that hole in the ceiling. Unless you have lived through such a transition, it is impossible to describe.

When you have seen a gas engine doing its job at times you wonder if it will ever make the next revolution. But here in The Reporter plant that old gas engine chugged away for nearly 20 years before it had its relief from an electric motor.

Gone are the gas engine, the electric motor the shafts, pulleys and long lines of leather belting. They are only memory now, having done a job when it was needed, and at a time when there was no need for rapid production.

Those few thousand sheets of newsprint used by The Reporter in those days, and handed one sheet at a time into the press, have catapulted to nearly 800 tons annually which thread through The Reporter's new press at a speed to 20,000 papers an hour.

Gone are the days of purchasing ink in five-gallon cans for use in printing the paper. Today it comes into The Reporter plant by tanker and is pumped into a huge storage facility, and then piped to the press.

Gone are all the clanging noises of the once noisy backshop of the printing plant, and all you hear is the buzz of computers at work, so fantastic it boggles the human mind.

Gone are the days of inserting sections or inserts into The Reporter by hand. This is all automatically done.

Frankly, aside from an old J & P Coats thread cabinet in which printing cuts were stored, and the old Reporter steel safe, there remain no reminders of those days of yesteryear when the old gas engine chugged its way throughout the day; the days of the handset type and the days of the expensive typesetting machines. Publisher Richard Rico has taken a broad broom and swept the place clean, consistently adding the most modern equipment available to produce a paper such as the award-winning Vacaville Reporter.

But, there's a bit of nostalgia when I go back and glance up at the ceiling and see that hole. That's how it all started.

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