

The Senator Who Is Mr. Solano County

By John Rico

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YESTERDAY IT WAS THE MAN WITH THE HOE - On several occasions I have referred back to famed poet Edwin Markham and his poem, "The Man With the Hoe." Markham, who spent his boyhood days in rural Vacaville, saw first-hand the strenuous efforts needed to till the soil. The first two lines in that poem read:

"Bowed by the weight of centuries he leans

Upon his hoe and gazes on the ground."

To introduce today's article, I offer my apologies to the late Edwin Markham because of a change in a few words to be made in the two lines above:

"Bowed by the weight of centuries he leans Upon his golf cart and gazes at the ball on the ground."

The hundreds of golfers, men and women, who use the course at nearby Green Valley Country Club, should be honored to see one of their members, nearing age 87, walking up and down the fairway, pulling his golf cart on which is strapped a bag and set of clubs. They see this bowed figure select a golf club, take a swing which almost catapults him off the ground, and then watches his little white ball on its way to the putting green.

Some people call him Luther, others say Lute, others use the title of Senator, but all of them know the individual as Luther E. Gibson of Vallejo.

Luther Gibson earned the title of Senator for his 18 years of service in the California State Senate from 1949 to 1966, as Solano County's representative. Throughout those many years, Senator Gibson's district was composed of only Solano County. In 1965 when Senate districts were re-apportioned and parts of other counties added to Gibson's district, he declined to be a candidate for re-election. He was a Solano County man, and that's where his efforts were channeled.

If I chose to enumerate and list all of the activities in which Luther Gibson has participated, it would make boring reading. Having been a close acquaintance for more than half a century, I have been able to watch with jealousy the vitality exerted by this individual.

For the more than half a century of devotions to the county, I am going to give him the label of "Solano County's Man of the Half Century," and I will wager that when a 100 years have gone by, he could continue to be "Solano County's Man of the Century."

Recently, I suggested to our editorial department that Senator Gibson's years and his devotion to the welfare of the county would make a good feature story, but Gibson has been reluctant to be exposed to any more publicity. So, what I am divulging here was not volunteered by him, but was researched by me, and are personal experiences I encountered throughout the years with a fellow newspaper publisher.

Gibson is a native of Santa Cruz, and his birthday falls on November 17. As a youngster he earned spending money by being a newspaper carrier in the Santa Cruz area. Later he tried his hand at being a printer, and being infatuated by the art, decided to make it his life's work. He did everything expected of him, from sweeping the floor to hand-feeding a printing press.

He had to take some time out to serve in

the Thirtieth Balloon Company during World War II, and saw service in France.

His newspaper career is like a yo-yo.

Along with partners he took over the Tribune at Antioch and then invaded the Vallejo field by starting the Mare Island Employee, a newspaper primarily for service people at the Naval Shipyard.

In 1921 he founded the Vallejo Morning Herald, giving Vallejo two newspapers. The Vallejo Evening Times was already there. In 1922 he took over the Times, and the Vallejo Times-Herald was born.

After long and hard years of building the Times-Herald, in recent years he disposed of the paper to an eastern chain. He told me one day: "Johnny, it's the biggest mistake I ever made."

The Senator continues to keep printer's ink in his blood by owning a newspaper in Benicia and one at Martinez.

I would say that our careers are somewhat similar. There is one noticeable difference, and that's in the established fact that he had parlayed his efforts into a bit more cash than I have.

I can well recall an elaborate party Senator Gibson hosted for many of the key office

holders in Sacramento, with the guest of honor being the late Gov. Earl Warren. To impress his guests with the importance of Solano County, Senator Gibson formed a committee which was instructed to gather Solano processed food products, have them neatly packed in cartons by the Nut Tree. The several hundred guests at the dinner were recipients of one of these packages.

Gibson pursued initial work on the proposed Monticello Dam as though he was later to become the sole owner. His close friendship with Gov. Warren and the late United States Senator William Knowland had an impact on final approval of funds for construction project.

Residents of Vallejo have honored their No. 1 citizen on numerous occasions. His success in securing the Solano County Fair at Vallejo is evidenced by Gibson Hall playing him honor.

During his years as state senator he championed construction of a new freeway and a bridge over the Carquinez Straits which shortens traveling distance from a point south of Fairfield to Martinez. It is the Luther Gibson Freeway.

As I revealed in the introduction of this article, any attempts to enumerate Gibson's contributions to the welfare of the county, would be an endless chore. When cooperation between the civilian communities and Travis Air Force Base became a necessity, Gibson was the first to suggest what is now the Solano County Armed Forces Committee. He was enamored by thoughts of a locally-owned Solano County bank, so he gathered together a handful of county residents, and the Vaca Valley Bank was born..

As I sat in my office typing this article, I was a bit dejected in the fact that men and women with Gibson's willingness to work hard, to serve others, to look beyond the mountains and see greener pastures, are rapidly becoming fewer and fewer.

If I made the statement that Gibson has been going through life sans enemies, people would know that to be a lie. Unfortunately, there is not a successful man on this earth who does not count his enemies as well as his friends.

It would also be fitting to pay tribute to Miss May Belle Freeman, who on October 20, 1922, became Mrs. Luther Gibson.

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