

## Ranch life full of drama

By Kristin Delaplane

Sunday, September 26, 1999

Today I am announcing my retirement from this column. It has been a source of great pleasure, and knowing there are many good stories yet to uncover, I feel some regret.

However, not all my work has lined local bird cages. I am happy to report that the columns, which began January 1995, have been archived by local museums and historical societies as well as by The Reporter at its Internet site.

Thank you to those who have responded so favorably to my work and a special thank you to the staff at The Reporter for their efforts on behalf of this column and its management who offered suggestions and then gave me a free hand in creating this feature.

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Dorothy Dawson Wallace traces her Dixon heritage to her parents. John Dawson (1884-1967) arrived in about 1912 with his brother, Bill. Bill opened a bar in the Capitol Hotel, and John worked as the bartender. In about 1918, high school teacher Fay Webb (1894-1978) came to Dixon for a teaching job. John had just returned from serving in France during World War I. The couple met in 1920.

While on their honeymoon, there was a fire in the Capitol Hotel, where John had been living. All his belongings were burned to a cinder. Bill moved his business across the street, and at the start of Prohibition, the business became Dawson's Cigar Store, though it was still a place where one could get a drink.

Dorothy was born in 1921. It was at this time that John was diagnosed with tuberculosis. After spending time in a sanitarium, he decided his health dictated that he should work outdoors.

In 1923, he purchased 14 acres to raise chickens. Shortly after that he added an 80-acre parcel. Over time, he purchased a total 734 acres.

John began building chicken houses for his start up of about 500 birds.

Dorothy described those early chicken houses: "The old California-style houses were highly labor intensive to build as well as maintain. They were double-walled with redwood, which nobody could afford now. By 1930 we had a quarter of a mile of these houses on both sides of the slough."

Eventually there were 14,000 birds. "Later we went into cage houses, which some people think were hard on chickens but they were easier to build and in caring for the chickens. This increased the capacity to 50,000 chickens."

Fay taught until 1930. During that time she decided to go into the squab business, and she ended up with 2,500 pigeons.

Dorothy described the operation: "About 1,500 squabs per month were shipped for the San Francisco market. Twice a week Mother would put the squabs in crates, and they'd be loaded on the train and shipped to Hayward, where there was a processing plant."

Fay's squabs proved highly successful and were the source of family teasing. "We used to tease Dad during the Depression, when eggs were 9 cents a dozen, that at least she made money with the squabs," said Dorothy. "The squabs were bought by the Chinese in the Bay Area and bought by the bigger hotels for 'squab under glass.'"

The family's home was located 1 1/2 miles from the train tracks. During the Depression there was a steady stream of people coming from the freight trains looking to work for food. There wasn't much need to hire labor, but everyone left with a paper bag full of fried egg sandwiches.

The squab business was still going strong, but in 1954, after moving to a new home away from the birds, Fay decided to fold that business. In the '40s, some years after Dorothy married George Wallace, he joined John in the chicken business.

The year John died, 1967, they had 37,000 to 40,000 birds. At that time, the bigger egg producers were operating with more than a million birds, so this smaller operation couldn't compete. George and Fay decided to gradually sell off the chickens.

Fay died in 1978. The next year the remaining birds were sold to a company that leased the place.

Those 55 years often were filled with drama.

In February 1959, on returning home from an evening with friends, the Dawsons were greeted by a man holding a sawed-off shotgun. John was tied up, and Fay was forced to leave with the man in her car. The house soon was surrounded with police and FBI vehicles. Highway 80 was lighted up like a Christmas tree lot with police cars traveling back and forth.

About 5 in the morning Fay's car was sighted in Winters. "The FBI and police tore out of here like they were sucked up in a vacuum cleaner," said Dorothy. "One guy was still holding onto the door as the cars were taking off."

The kidnapper drove through an FBI roadblock at the Milk Farm. With three police vehicles in hot pursuit, he fired the shotgun, blowing out the back window, and dropped the gun on the back floor.

The man told Fay, "You better get in the back; this might get rough." Then he told her to hand him the gun.

The car was forced off the road at the Nut Tree. The front side, where Fay had been sitting, was wiped out. During her night of terror, Fay asked the kidnapper, "What on earth are you doing this for?" He said he needed money. Fay responded, "Well, we've got a lot of land, but we sure don't have a lot of money!"

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