

*PART FOUR*

*ALL THAT GLITTERS*

## The Dredgers

The history of gold in California has been one of the most interesting histories of all. Fair Oaks did not enter in to much of the actual claiming of gold. However, most of us old timers well remember the gold dredges howling day and night as they gleefully gobbled up the grape vineyards and charged at the bluffs as they scraped the bars along the American River.

Other than a few settlers left from the Gold Rush before the Fair Oaks colony was formed, I don't suppose many of our folks actually worked the gold rush. Gold did, however, enter into our history in that many of our men worked for the dredge companies. At one time there were 250 men working down on the river. During the wars and depressions Fair oaks never suffered too greatly from the lack of anything because GOLD means money!

I can remember as a child the grrr-rr-rumble-knock-knock-scree-scraw-eeeeee-bam-bam-boom as the dredge worked through its shift. Everyone I knew worked on the thing as an oiler. It occurs to me just how much noise it made for something that was being continually oiled.

My mother remembers as an eight year old child hearing the strange sounds in the night. She had been told there were Hindu folks living here and she assumed it was their beautiful music. A dredge was a giant floating barge of a sort. On it were levels of rock sorters that took out the cobbles and ran them out the back into long piles. Subsequent sorters took out smaller gravel and finally the heavier gold was separated. I had pictured a glistening ship full of gold nuggets. Not so. Gold attracts a metal that covers it with a dull gray mercury coating. Most of our gold in this area was a finer gold dust. This gold was picked up from as deep as 100 feet down in a pond of water on which the boat floated as it went forward into the red topsoil and spewed cobbles out behind. The digging was done by a bucket line that went down into the soil beneath the water. There was no way to oil this part of the machinery and it got sand in the pins and upper tumblers, hence the beautiful music. Richard Pearson who worked on the dredgers for 32 years told me that about the time the sun rose pink above the Sierras it sounded like pretty fine music to him.

Each day one of the dredges was shut down and cleaned. The gold was taken off and taken over to Natoma for retortion. The mechanical parts were taken apart and repaired. Some of these parts weighed between 8 and 65 tons, and were handled with a Caterpillar tractor and an iron wagon. There was a man in charge, someone like the captain of a ship, called a dredge master. This man saw to the upkeep of the dredge, the directing of crews, and the responsibility for the cleaning.

Cleaning meant gathering the gold from the dredge and taking it to the town of Natoma where it was processed into gold bars. The biggest bar of gold

that Dick Pearson remembered seeing was worth \$30,000. It was estimated that between 1898 and 1948 that the dredges in California had produced five hundred million dollars worth of gold in their fifty years of dredging at the going price of \$35 an ounce.

There came a time when the lights went out. The music stopped. The dredges shut down. And, that was not so long ago. The dredges worked our area up into the 1950's and the last of them was only disassembled and sent to South America in the 1960's. The main reason for the end of this era was that there was just not enough open ground left in our area for them to work any longer.

It seems sad in a way to think I will never hear "Rock Music" like that again.

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## The Rock Crusher

One of the interesting things I remember as a child was a trip with my dad down to the rock crusher. There would be a day when he would take the high rails off of his old flat bed International truck and put on a set of side boards about a foot high. Off we would go down to get a load of sand or crushed rock.

It was not far to go. The gold dredge's of the late 1800's and 1900's had dredged right up to the cliffs along the south side of town. This land had been planted almost from Fair Oaks to Lodi to what is said to have been the second largest vineyard in the world at that time. The dredging operation "roto-tilled" the soil a little too deep. It left the layer of rich soil under a deep covering of cobbles.

The Natomas Consolidated Companies set about to restore the land to usefulness. Intending to turn the land back to orchards, they set about to dispose of the thousands of acres of cobbles. By 1911 they had the largest rock crushing plant in the United States. The cobbles were found to be the most excellent material for road building. By 1910 they were shipping 15,713 railroad cars of crushed rock and gravel per year. That is about 50 cars each day of the week except Sunday.

This crushed rock was used to build what is known as macadam roads. This type of road is built by layering rock and pressing it down into a soil roadbed and rolling it. Later these were oiled. It is a fact that the Folsom road running the twenty miles from Sacramento to Folsom was the first oiled road in the State of California.

The concrete material manufactured by the plant was used to build many of the fine buildings in our area and throughout the Sacramento Valley.

In a recent conversation with Fair Oaks Historian, Iva Langness about the rock crusher, we both recalled the tranquillity the sound of the machinery cast. The sound of the rock being crushed was a steady grr-rrr-rrr-r, like a great ocean from where we lived.

I remember it as the Pacific Coast Aggregates. The rock crusher was down and over the old bridge to where the railroad station was to the south of town. The rock crushing plant was on the left and to the right was a neat little row of company homes. I always admired these little yellow ochre and brown homes with their picket fences. People we know, like the Bruggers and the Campoys lived there.

Some years ago, in seeking a name for a church being built in the area, I contacted the Natoma Company to inquire about the use of their name. My

call was returned by a man named Dante Lembi. He told me of the plans they had for the Gold River area. The Natoma Company had never gave up the idea of redeeming the dredged land. We now have our neighbors to the south - Gold River.

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## GOLD!

Fair Oaks was not too involved in the Gold Rush as far as I know. The closest it may have come was the gold dredge that ran right up to the south side of the American River.

I read an article one time of a man who found gold dust on a piece of land on Sunset Avenue and bought the land thinking he could separate the gold dust from the red clay. It was too expensive a project and soon was abandoned.

I recall a story of gold in Fair Oaks that is history and over the years has become legend. There was a robber with a big bag of gold coming down near the corner of Fair Oaks Boulevard and Greenback Lane. He decided to hide his bag of gold in a field. Not too long after he buried his bag of gold in the field, the farmer decided to go out and take his mule and plow to work up his land. Unknowingly his plow hit the bag of gold and spilled it as it dragged along. The part of the story I like best is that in 1948 my brother-in-law took a picture right in that area of a rainbow actually going down into the ground.

My Uncle John told me that the robber buried the gold in the ground at the length of the shadow of an oak tree, at a certain hour of the day. When John was a youngster in Fair Oaks, folks were still going out there at that hour of the day and digging at the end of the shadow of every oak tree in sight. I can remember spidery crevasses out there big enough for a cow to fall in when I was a child. I never knew what caused them and just always assumed it was some sort of natural phenomenon.

Searching for gold in Fair Oaks could well be a wonderful outing for a family or a tired entrepreneur.

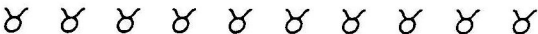
I remember a time many years ago, our son came home from a rafting trip around Lake Natoma and told me that he had seen a place on the shore where the gold lay glistening in the sun along the water's edge. He wanted me to go with him to try and find the place on foot coming in from the eastern end of Sunset Avenue. We took all the necessary things, like plenty of ice tea and homemade cookies and, of course, the gold pans and tweezers to pick the big pieces of gold out with and the bag to put it in.

We drove to a barricade at the end of Sunset Avenue and then set out on foot along the remains of an old dirt road. As we walked along the road, we enjoyed the untouched land. We listened for the dreaded "rattler" snake. We stopped to taste some wild blackberries. We looked at the last of the spring flowers. We were fascinated by the deep cuts the Chinese had made in the rock as we approached the area where the American River use to flow freely.

The Chinese used the cut method of mining gold and now the cuts were full of green moss and maidenhair fern.

It took a while, but we finally found the shore that had beckoned with the glistening gold. The water was lapping up on shore continually moving the scalloping edge of black iron and the glistening "Fools Gold." No matter, we ate our cookies and drank our tea and panned for gold in the cool clean water. We talked as the afternoon shade of oaks moved across the cove.

As we walked back along the dirt road the face powder grade dust coated our wet legs. We enjoyed the smell of the willows in the hot sun of an afternoon. The real golden treasure of the day was the time spent with a young son.



DOG GONE

Our farm animals were very much a part of the family life, especially the dogs. My grandfather bought my mother a big Collie dog when she got married. Patsy was her name. One day Patsy brought all the neighbor's turkeys home and put them in our pens. It was Uncle Earl's dog, Ring who brought the snake and laid it at my mother's feet. Barney, Joe Cimbalista's big Irish Wolfhound first introduced himself to my mother by coming up and putting his cold wet nose on her hot back as she was packing fruit on a summer day. Tippiie was a little Mediterranean Poodle who we took in when his Japanese owners went away to internment camp. He never did seem too smart until one day my mother had him in the car when she went to Oki Nursery to buy some trees. He heard someone there speak in the Japanese language he had known so many years before and went absolutely ecstatic.

Our last three dogs were Patsy Odell, Judy, and Critter. Patsy Odell was a little black Cocker Spaniel who made friends with the convict that had hid under the barn. Next was Judy, a regal dalmation who produced another of our dogs, Fogg Nozzle. Fogg rode with the Fair Oaks Firemen until his unfortunate demise. Critter was a wonder of wonders. Critter was a German Shepherd set on a dash hound chassis. Critter had to wear a muzzle, not because she would bite, but because she ate every ripe peach that fell to the ground and got too fat.

All these little animals remained childlike and perfect. We could call them some of our best friends.

## The Car

*Some of my very warmest memories of old time Fair Oaks are of people and their cars. One of my favorite pastimes, there under the old willow tree on Sunset Avenue, was to watch who drove by. You could tell who it was by the shape of the car, or the sound it made and even the posture of the driver. I would like to share a story Mary Ann McKenny wrote many years ago about an old car I remember so well.*

The car certainly wasn't a beauty, she was in fact awfully ugly. The car came to us brand new when I was three years old. I can never remember her looking new with shiny bright paint, but only an oxidized non-descript tan. My best memories of her were when she was aging. The car had lost two windows by the time I had started high school, a front and a back one, this caused good ventilation.

The head liner was worn and torn, grayed and frayed, portions of the liner were still clinging faithfully while most of it had given up with a sigh and was hanging limp. Even the upholstery had worn away on the drivers seat and the springs were showing. The floor matting was gone leaving the skeleton of a coarse web collecting seasons of mildews and mud.

We felt a certain pride in her, that she was still a gutsy car for all her outward appearance. My dad's theory is that engines run best at their peak performance. "Don't lug an engine to death at slow, inefficient speeds. You put the pedal to the metal and go." We didn't travel leisurely. We only stopped for tickets!

Nothing was ever replaced on the car. I can't remember how long she went without the muffler. I know for years you could hear her coming before you could see her. The neighbors would say, "Here comes Mac." Then he would go flying past, the weeds along the roadside would flatten out in his wake, then flip back with a quiver as the roar of the car would echo off into the distance.

She had get up and go. The trouble was she had more going power than stopping power. Though my dad had the car mastered, my mother could never get the braking down to a good system. My brother and I had fun. When my mother drove the car to our Folsom Grandmother's house, we would make bets on how many times around the block and how many houses from grandmother's we would make the final stop.

My father, Mac was a mechanical engineer, near genius, but if the car couldn't be fixed with bailing wire it didn't get fixed. With the exception of the time when the rear axle came loose and slid out from under her as she cornered. My dad nailed a two by six with sixteen penny nails to the underside of her fender after the axle had been pushed back in under her. The beam held



it all in snugly. On the outside of the fender the nails showed like stitches on a new wound. They soon rusted over to blend in with the rest of the car.

In 1952, after many hard miles the end came. No longer would bailing wire and beams fix all her ills. She would have to be put out to pasture.

My brother, Michael and I stood by to open the gates. My dad started up the old faithful car for the last time, gunned the engine, and shifted the gears. She roared through the first gate, then made it through the second with mud flying. She began to cough and sputter, with a jerk her pace slackened; she stalled and died. My father jumped out, slammed her door, gave her a pat on the hood, dusted off his hands, and walked away from the 1939 Pontiac Chief.

Never in this day of all the foreign cars will Fair Oaks again know the zest of the early days of American automobiles.



### Tree Trimming

I think the best gun story in my day was the day when Mac told Michael to trim a large limb off the old cottonwood tree that was behind the barn.

For some reason Mike thought he would just take it off with a few shots from his dad's 30.06. He was doing a pretty good job of it when he felt a vice grip go from back to front and front to back of his collar bone. Old Sheriff Myklebost had a grip on him. The sheriff was very calm about it all. Maybe he was honestly puzzled. He just said, "What are you trying to do?"