

PART SEVEN

SPRING TIME UP SUNSET AVENUE

GOODNESS SNAKES ALIVE

Snakes play an interesting part in the history of Ireland, but who amongst us would ever think of a snake story in Fair Oaks.

Well, let me tell you, snake stories can take up a whole evening of tale telling in our family. My mother as a child became frightened by an eclipse of the sun and crawled into a culvert. To her horror the darkness was full of writhing snakes. This trauma left her with a fear of snakes that bordered on temporary insanity when she came upon one.

In the early days snakes were a common sight in Fair Oaks. There were on the bluffs, along the river, and in the dredger tailings, huge rattlesnakes. Rattlesnakes on the sunny side of every boulder waiting to strike. Common in a garden were the king snake in his brilliant yellow rings and the gopher snake in his rattlesnake costume. Most of these snakes just went about their own business but once in a while one poor fellow would happen across my mother's path and this is what my story is about.

My mother moved to Fair Oaks in the early 1920's as a child. She met my father who lived across the street and they continued to live on Sunset Avenue after they were married. There was a spring the snakes came up from the draw. Very often Wanda would be hanging out the wash and a snake would come by in the grass. Just as soon as she saw the snake she would throw everything up in the air and scream and scream and scream. When she got control of herself she would take off running in any direction. Grace Wasgatt, a kind neighbor observing this for some time, decided my mother must be having some sort of seizures. She finally got up the courage to come down and speak to her about it and to ask if there was anything she should do. I think the answer was, "Hell no! It's just a damn snake."

My first on sight snake story was of a swift lizard which might just as well have been a snake. These lizards were about two feet long and just had tiny legs in a couple of places. My mother had a small room downstairs where she kept beautiful African violets. One morning she went down to tend her flowers and she found one of these lizards wrapped around a clay pot. She was older and braver by now so she went and got the shot gun, came back down the stairs and blew the thing in to various sized pieces. One thing about lizards is that any good sized piece will continue to jump and wiggle for hours all by itself. So every few hours she would come down and find a new piece of the lizard, get it in a shovel, and by the time she got the door open she would be screaming. She would then throw shovel and all out across the driveway. Julia Forrest observing this a couple of times just thought it was some sort of household disturbance, but being a nurse she finally became alarmed enough to come over and ask if my mother had been having these fits for any length of time.

My Uncle Earl Vincent and his father-in-law, Jim Clydesdale were pulling out some orange trees that had frozen on our ten acres on the corner of Chicago and Sunset. Ring, the dog was busily digging and snorting around. Just as my mother came along he found a fat snake sleeping down in the roots of the tree that had just been brought up out of the ground. He must have thought what a nice prize so he got the snake and dropped it at my mother's feet. "AAARGH!" She was still jumping up and down screaming as Earl got the snake hauled away and buried. Well, you would never guess, dogs don't know what "AAARGH!" means so he ran and dug the snake up, brought it back and laid it at her feet again. He sat back and thought that was about the most interesting thing a dog had seen around Fair Oaks in quite a while. They finally had to chop the snake in to so many small pieces that the dog couldn't find it again.

Well, the snake stories continued right up until we sold the ranch in 1974. People by then knew my mother was terrified of snakes so they tried to avoid having her come across one. One of the neighbors, Joe Cimbilista found a snake and thought he best get rid of it before it crawled up to my mom's house, so he buried it in the orchard. Poor man, who would have calculated that the huge line of aluminum surface irrigation pipe was due to come down through there that day. That day was fine, but the next day after the water had run 24 hours, my little barefoot mother waded out into the mud to move the pipe and, you guessed it, got that dead snake wound around her ankles. Oh, what a sight to see a tiny lady nearly seventy years old jumping up and down in the mud, screaming.

Charlotte Wanda Kennedy Vincent, many of her ancestors came from Ireland. Could be St. Patrick couldn't stand the screaming, or maybe the snakes came to him for deliverance.

Happy St. Patrick's Day.



This is the Irish Jig that Frank Wilson Vincent sang to his boys in an Irish brogue. I remember my Father singing it and recently his brother, John sang it for me over the telephone.

IRISHMAN'S SHANTY

*Did you ever go into an Irishman's Shanty
And ther' you'll find the cornbeef aplenty,
The bullfrog a hoppin all over the floor,
Wiggletail a making the buttermilk roar.*

*Go into the house, mud up to the knees,
Crawl into bed and be covered with fleas,
Patty got a flea by the ear,
He kicked him and cursed him and punished him severe.*

*He got the flea with his ear to the floor,
He swore he'd bite Patty no more.*



Mrs. Codman's Boston Brown Bread

1 cup molasses
2 cups sour milk or buttermilk
1 cup rye flour
1 cup cornmeal
1 cup graham flour

Stir together and let stand four or five hours or overnight.

When ready to bake, dissolve 2 1/4 teaspoons baking soda in 1/4 cup water and add to the soaked mixture. Stir well.

Pour into a greased flat large (12 x 16) cake pan. Put in a cold oven. Turn on heat and set for 350°. Bake one hour. Serve hot with butter. (Great with baked beans).



Mrs. Winnifred Codman should not be forgotten in the history of Fair Oaks. Mrs. Codman was one of the first women to really become involved with community affairs. She was very active in the Indian Affairs in California. Her parents, the Radke's were early settlers in Fair Oaks.

I most remember her driving around in her 1930's car with her flapper hair cut, long coat with big collar up and a cloche hat. The car was usually full of big German Shepherd dogs.

GROCERY SHOPPING

Grocery shopping in the early days of Fair Oaks was much different than it is now days. When my Grandfather Frank Vincent arrived in Fair Oaks groceries were ordered from Sacramento and shipped by train to the depot across the old Fair Oaks bridge.

Our family was always very fortunate to be almost totally self sufficient when it came to our food. My grandfather had pigs, chickens, turkeys, beef and a cow. We grew everything imaginable in the way of fruits, nuts, and vegetables. He even planted several acres of eucalyptus that provided all the heat and cooking fuel needed for several of our homes. Eucalyptus can be cut just a couple of feet from the ground and will attain full growth again every three years. Eucalyptus was brought into California in the hopes of using it for railroad ties. I would not suppose it was a hard enough wood.

So a grocery shopping trip was mostly to obtain staples such as flour and sugar. Earl Vincent said that they would order flour and sugar from Arata Brothers or Black's Package Store in Sacramento and my grandfather would go down to the train station with the horse and wagon and pick up the supplies.

There were a couple of small general stores in Fair Oaks, but they were used for making purchases of something you had run out of.

My Uncle John Vincent told me his dad had a favorite meat store in Folsom. John said there were some things my grandfather liked to get there. One day he took the horse and wagon, John, and a fat little English Bull dog and they went all the way to Folsom to get meat. The little dog was left up on the wagon seat while they went in. While they were in the store, two grizzly looking fellows came in. With them were two huge mean hunting dogs. The men purchased with their order two nice big bones for their dogs. They took the bones to the door and threw them to their dogs. As one of the bones sailed over the wagon the fat grumpy old dog shot up in the air, grabbed the bone and sat down again. One of the mean dogs looked and looked, he never could figure out where his bone had went.

Another of John's favorite grocery shopping trips was to go with his father in the wagon with the horses and go to the General Store in Perkins. It was a whole days trip to get there, to shop and then come home. John remembers so dearly those days with his father. His father would bring along bread, and the makings for sandwiches. They would stop under one of the huge oak trees along the way to have a picnic.

My Grandmother Elizabeth, died due to complications of childbirth just a very few years after they came to Fair Oaks. My grandfather then appeared to be a very well to do widower. Next door to him lived Julia Schraft, an old maid

and her widowed mother. My grandfather must have sensed the threat to his melancholy, because he treated them politely, but with great reserve. Julia used to love to tell me the story. She would start out by saying, "Your Grandfather was sure a strange old man." I would always help her along by saying, "And why is that?" Then she would embark upon this story.

Julia came to Fair Oaks about 1920, about four years after my grandmother died. My grandfather by that time had purchased a truck. Julia had no transportation, so she would walk into Fair Oaks, buy her groceries, and come carrying them home along the dusty road. If my grandfather happened to come along in his truck, he would stop abruptly, get out, without a word he would take the groceries from her and put them in his truck. He would then get back in his truck without giving the slightest invitation for Julia to ride. He would then drive off leaving her to walk the rest of the way. Later she would arrive at her driveway all damp and dusty with heavy long cotton stockings drooping down around her ankles, and there would be her groceries setting along the road by her driveway.

And so, like I say, "Grocery shopping was different in those days."

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The Birds

I must tell you, I really do love birds. We have several families of them sharing our palm tree. We buy bird seed by the fifty pound sack to feed the winter birds that return to our house every year and feed just outside my window. Trusting little birds feed just inches from the window where my lazy old cat lays in the sun. We leave the top of the cherry tree, and the loquat tree for them in the summer, and all through the winter they have the ripest of the Granny Smith apples.

The bird population in Fair Oaks has not always had it so good. In the early days, flocks of birds would come in and totally destroy a crop in a matter of hours. We had good birds, pheasant and quail, who lived their lives out undisturbed on the ranch there on Kenneth Avenue.

Then there were the bad birds. In the spring the robins would come in by the thousands and go after the almond blossoms just as they fattened up to bloom. That was springtime. As summer came the crows would come and eat almonds as they matured, and take a bite out of a sweet peach or ravish a cherry tree. It became necessary to try and scare them away with the shotgun. It was a job for the family and some of the neighbors for years.

As the subdivisions encroached on the land we had farmed for nearly sixty years, the neighbors began to complain. I went with my mother one day to meet with the County Board of Supervisors to ask for a permit to shoot a gun on the ranch. What a delightful diversion it was for that group of men to see a short little white haired woman who was so mad. Our Supervisor, Ancil Hoffman introduced her to the board as a neighbor as well as an official gesture. My mother explained that the birds were devouring the cherry, peach and almond crops. The board took it real lightly and suggested they pass an ordinance against birds eating cherries! They gave her the permit with limitations. A week later she was back and let them know it was no laughing matter. She needed a permit to shoot the birds until the crop was in, "or how was she going to pay the \$1,400 in county taxes." The board approved her request, but that is not the best part of my story.

On Tuesday morning, June 4, 1963 there was a front page article sharing the story of the death of Pope John. The headline was, 'HOFFMAN TO COMBAT INVASION OF BIRDS'. On Monday morning Hoffman had come into the board meeting and asked for a permit to shoot crows. He said, "Mrs. Vincent is chasing the birds over to my place and they're eating my almonds!" Hoffman's request threatened to fall on deaf ears. Henry Kloss finally made a motion to approve the request, but it almost died for lack of a second. Leslie Wood added the second with a caution to Hoffman that the board did not want to start a neighborhood feud.

That was not the end of the story. As years went by the city people who moved in to the quiet countryside began to complain of the shooting. A school was being built across the street from the ranch so something had to be done. I am not sure how it came about, but I have a good notion it had something to do with the County Farm Advisor's Office. My folks were furnished with several big carbide guns. A carbide gun doesn't shoot anything, it just explodes with a loud bang when a drop of water drips down on some chemical making a noise not to be equaled by Wellington's Victory. Well you might have guessed, my poor old dad was crept up on by a deputy sheriff with gun drawn because someone had called in and reported someone was shooting a cannon over there in the ranch every two minutes from daylight until dark. I have never seen my dad so mad.

The birds had won the victory.

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THE RAT PATROL

My boyfriend and I were parked out in the backyard late one night. My mother came down the back stairs in her nightgown carrying the shot gun. He got that car started and got out of there in a hurry. She had just come out to shoot a rat that was chewing down in the cellar.

I think the nightgown would have scared someone about as bad as the gun. My mother was not particularly domesticated. She had tried to make a night gown out of red and white striped chicken feed bags. She did fairly well cutting out a square thing with a hole for the head and two holes for the arms. She then prettied it up by sewing a big ruffle of the striped material on the bottom. The best part was the sash. She had not quite measured where the waist should be so it tied down about where her knees were.

She did get the rat, though. She blew him not to kingdom come, but up through the closet floor into my bedroom!

My sister wrote the following verse in the early sixties when she was in high school

The Shotgun Duel

Out of the field came the quiet cry, Wanda! Wanda!

Out of the door, a slim figure darted,

A steady hand grasped the loaded shotgun.

A sinister smile crossed the pale face.

With gleaming gun held across folded arms,

The figure crept from the yard, out into the field.

She stopped, looked into the sky,

From overhead came a flock of famished birds.

A bird was suddenly sighted,

The quiet click of the gun as it was cocked

was the only sound.

The gun was lifted towards the sky,

The index finger pressed the trigger,

BANG! Five fell dead,

I beat Ed!

- Katherine (Vincent) Odom

THE EASTER NEST

The celebration of the coming of spring and the coming to life of flowers and fields has long been one of my favorite times of the year.

The making of an Easter Nest and the coloring of eggs has long been a tradition in our Kennedy ancestry. My mother's parents always made Easter a very special holiday for the family. There were new dresses, christenings, and the Sunday that all of the family went to great grandfather's church in Roseville. After church everyone gathered at the creek at my grandparent's for a barbecue and picnic.

My mother still remembers an Easter when she was a child. The little family lived up above Lincoln and were to raise wheat for the government. They were very, very poor and about all they had to eat was the wheat that they had raised the year before. There were no special surprises to be had in those years. That night, after the children were put to bed, my dear grandfather went out and pulled soft wheat grass and made a nest. In the morning, when the children got up, they found in their nest a white mother rabbit about to have her babies. Grandfather had traded some labor for her.

When I was a child this same grandfather had purchased a six hundred acre piece of land in Loomis. This land did not provide much more of a living than the wheatland did. Easter week all of the grandchildren would go to spend their Easter Vacation with the Kennedy Grandparents. We were to help with the preparations for the big picnic down by the creek on Sunday. The big project for the week was to build the Easter Nest. We spent the days running over the sunny hills gathering wild flowers to start the nest.

The big day was Saturday. Grandpa would go up on the hill by the pig pens and get the big truck. He would get it started just enough to come rolling down the hill to the house. There were about twelve of us little grandchildren by then and we would all pile in to the back of the big cattle truck. Grama would help him set the buckets of water up on the back of the truck that she had filled with water from the well by the front door.

When all was ready Grampa climbed up onto the old leather truck seat with its stuffing and springs sticking out. Only the old dog sat up front with him. My grandfather was a man carved out by time. He was a thin man left stooped and bow legged by arthritis. His black Irish curls were now just a fringe of white ringlets around his weathered bald head. His most endearing feature was his crooked nose. His nose had been badly broken in crossing the H Street Bridge in his old touring car. He had hit a bump so hard he bounced up and hit his nose on one of the bows of the soft top. What he lacked for in beauty he made up for in a heart full of love for his family.

He would get the truck started with a half dozen leaping jerks as it rolled down the driveway to Horseshoe Bar Road. Some grinding gears and a couple backfires and we would be on our way. The back of the big high railed truck was filled with screaming, giggling children splashed with water. We could see his face in the big side mirror laughing.

Our chore was to gather the flowers for the Easter Nest. We would drive the roads around Loomis and stop at every field of wild flowers we came to. Loomis in the 1940's was just open pasture land and fruit orchards. In the spring it was a mass of wild flowers. All of those flowers were known by name and cherished as we carefully picked just the stems. They were made into small childish bouquets and put into the buckets of water. There was a small reservoir we stopped at and picked woodwardia fern that grew higher than our heads. This trip took all day and there was much to squeal and laugh about like cows chasing us and of looking for just waking rattlesnakes.

Late in the day we would come back to the ranch tired and happy. I think this excursion gave grandmother the chance to boil and color a large quantity of eggs. Some of the eggs were really strange. She had quail, pheasant, guinea hen, silkie and maybe peacock or turkey eggs along with the regular hens eggs. I am not too sure anyone ever ate one of them!

When we got home we would mow the lawn and rake the soft grass into a nest. Then we would crawl under the house and get out fruit canning jars and wash them. When we had everything all together we would make the Easter Nest. This nest was several feet across with the soft grass in the center. The flowers were made into bouquets in the jars of water with the tallest in the back and ending with the short little ham and eggs in front of the buttercups.

Finally, we were done. We ate dinner and were all off to sleep with the excitement of the finest of Christmases. Easter was a very special day too.

In the morning we would wake up and run outside to see our lovely Easter Nest all freshened up by the night air. We were always surprised and delighted to find our nest piled with an assortment of eggs all beautifully colored and arranged.

The world around us was bursting with the promise that life was sweet and that spring had come again.



THE RESURRECTION ACCORDING TO KRISTIN

When my granddaughter was about two years old we were watching a Civil War story on the television one evening. One fellow was leaning against a tree dying. Little Kristin asked me, "Gramma, what are they going to do with that dead guy?" Such a question for a two year old. I told her they were going to send him home to his mother. I made haste to tell my son-in-law that there was a question he should answer.

So he set about on a day and took Kristin to the grave of Captain Michael R. Mckenny, her grandfather. He explained to her that her grandfather was a believer. He had died and his soul and spirit had gone to Heaven. Now his body lay in the ground under the huge grave marker. He told her how we believe that at the last day God would come and raise him up complete and alive again.

Quite some time went by and one night Kristin's mother was reading her the story of Heidi. When she mentioned the grandfather, little Kristin perked up. She said, "I have a grandfather. He is hiding under a rock. The mean guys haven't come for him yet.!"



CORN FLAKE MACAROONS

This is a cholesterol free recipe. I remember my mother making these when I was a little girl. During the war years it was difficult to get coconut. They are a facinating tasty treat!

- 4 egg whites at room temperature
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 1/2 teaspoon cream of tarter
- 1 1/4 cups of white sugar
- 1 1/2 teaspoons vanilla
- 4 cups Corn Flakes

Beat egg whites until frothy. Add salt and cream of tarter and beat until stiff. Gradually add sugar, a tablespoon at a time and continue to beat until very stiff. Add vanilla. Gently fold in Corn Flakes. Drop by teaspoonsful onto greased baking sheets. Bake in a 300° oven for 20 minutes or until firm. Makes 80.



FIESTA DAYS

The Fair Oaks Fiesta of 1949, probably the first fiesta in Fair Oaks, is not beyond my recall. It was the Centennial of the 1849 Gold Rush. Most of the activities were centered around the "Good Old Days". All of them!

The purpose of the activities was to collect \$10,000 to build a swimming pool beside the Community Clubhouse. The celebration went on for more than a year. Probably the most noticeable event was the beard growing contest. Every man in town grew the best beard he knew how and those who did not grow a beard were promptly arrested when they came into town and fined.

One of the most interesting stories is of the gambling hall run by one of our prominent citizens and winked at by the sheriff. They were doing real well until some righteous citizen wrote a letter about it to the Sacramento Bee!

In honor of the Gold Rush Era, 300 miners from the foothills were invited to lunch at the old Fair Oaks Grammar School and there was a demonstration of the latest gold mining equipment. The grading that was done free for the school that day would have cost \$3,000. All the children got the day off from school.

George Frazier brought in 150 Horned Toads from Texas and there was a horned toad derby. Afterward they were turned loose to meet their distant cousins here Fair Oaks.

There were all the usual events; a queen contest with ticket sales for votes, rodeo, carnival, Indian Dances, food galore, and the parade of all parades. The parade was announced by a real Indian runner carrying the official Centennial Flag. The parade, including eight mounted posses, patrols and riding clubs took over an hour to pass the reviewing stand. There were six bands in full uniform, including a military band from Mather Field. There was even an air show at Phoenix Field with stunt flying and parachute jumps. Other activities included the community dances and dinners.

As a young girl I took part in the events. I was in the eighth grade and in one of the first Girl Scout Troops. We had a wonderful group of ladies who worked with us and made it possible for us to sing at many of the talent shows. My friend Mary Ann's father drove us down to Fair Oaks for the show in his biggest gravel truck. It looked like it had come through the war and was camouflaged with years of dust and mud. I cannot imagine myself, a gawky twelve year old, climbing up over the back of that truck wearing a turquoise net formal borrowed from some trusting person. I remember so well standing up in the back of that truck riding through the sweet evening air with that formal swirling with the dust around me. I do still have times when from the back of

my head come the tunes to songs like, "East is East and West is West, Cruising Down the River, and Lavenders Blue, Dilly Dilly".

The talent shows were the best ever. One of them was all western. The hit of the show was Lucille Heim, wife of our fire chief, who sang "Pistol Packin' Mama". My little two year old cousin got so carried away she ran from the audience and went up on the stage and danced, holding up her little dress so that pink ruffled panties showed. The show stopper of the evening was Amos Smith and Bob Massey dressed as a horse riding a tandem bicycle across the stage singing "Pony Boy". Somehow two men steering, while dressed in a horse costume, leaves a lot to chance and they lost control and headed down the stairs toward the audience. Those who could catch their breath were shrieking and getting out of the way, fast!

Not all went well with the activities. There were dozens of benefit dinners served by various organizations. One of the groups served a scrumptious baked ham dinner with desert. Our Girl Scout Troop served the ham dinner in the Community Club House to several hundred people one night and cleaned up afterward. When we were all done an exhausted troop of 12 year olds gathered in one of the side rooms for our dinner. (Our reward for serving.) They had run out of food and someone went over to the grocery store and got us each a slice of cold shivery jellied chopped ham lunchmeat. There may have been a store bought cookie too, but I am still too mad to remember.

All in all, after a year of activities they took in \$5,559.60 and spent \$5,534.09 for a profit of \$25.51 to go toward the new Community Swimming Pool.

Everyone had a real good time!

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FLOOD!

When Johnny Cash wrote, "Folsom Prison Blues" I wonder if he didn't get the idea for the lines of another song. It would seem likely. "How high's the water, Mama? Five foot high and risin'."

In the old days, before the Folsom Dam, the American River used to go on a rampage every few years. The water used to rush down out of the Sierra's and flood for miles and miles.

There is an interesting story in the memories of Frank Campoy, Senior about the river. The Campoy's lived in one of the little houses west of the PCA rock crushing plant. The only warning they had that the river was rising was to keep track of how much rain was falling in the mountains and how much snow that it would melt. They would put a marker in the ground and check it every fifteen minutes to see if the water was rising or going down. High water would last about a day and then it would take about four days to get the house all cleaned out again. Each time they had to move their belongings to high ground. One time only the chimney of the house was left above the water. Finally they made a wise decision and moved up to Ridge Street in Fair Oaks.

The river flooded many times when I was a child and it was something to do to go out above the river on the bluffs and watch the flood waters. All sorts of things would float past. Parents always warned us not to go near the edge of the cliff as it might also cave into the water. It was really a fearsome thing to see huge logs piling up against the bridge. Sometimes there would be men out on the bridge trying to clear the debris before it took the supports out with it.

In the all time record flood of November 1950 the water crested at 31 feet, only to be followed by a 32 foot crest two days later. Pilings were knocked out by huge logs and our Fair Oaks firemen had to close off traffic to part of the bridge while it was being repaired.

There were squatters by the dozens who lived in under that bridge in ramshackle huts made of willow and old blankets, old sheet metal, cardboard boxes and whatever they could find. The fireman got most to leave, but had to finally go out and rescue some that had evacuated to high ground that had become an island. Some insisted on staying there with their possessions no matter what came.

There was a time when the whole bridge did wash out and ended up in Japan. You wait, I'll tell that story another time.

WAR STORY!

The little gold stars hung in the windows until they were faded and tattered, never quite compensating for the pain and loss they represented.

The first that war affected our family was World War I. My grandfather received notice that he was to be drafted and should report to the draft office in downtown Roseville for immediate duty. All of the goodbyes were said and tears of anguish were still flowing as he left his little family in the street with the horse and wagon. When he went into the draft office they informed him that the war was over. The announcement was made during the time he was enroute and he could go home.

World War II took many of our family away to fight. Those who stayed home were in war support trades. Many of our good Japanese neighbors were sent to internment camps. Some our family farmed their land for them until they came back. Earl Vincent tended the land still farmed by the Arase family to this day.

I think the biggest effect that the War had on Fair Oaks was the employment and commerce it provided. Many folks who were just making a living at farming went to work at the Signal Depot, Mather Field or McClellan Field. Many homes and rooms were rented to military folks.

I was affected greatly by the war. My parents never felt a child could understand grave things so they did not explain what was going on. I can remember my mother crouching by the radio at night listening to war news. We went to the ocean and stayed at Stinson Beach. The windows of the house had to be covered. The adults would run out and look at ships with telescopes. I was aware to be sure. Often a convoy of military vehicles with soldiers in uniform and battle gear would come up Sunset Avenue. I was not sure that the war was not going on right here in Fair Oaks.

The navigator training and flight schools at Mather Field sent planes lumbering over our house day and night. I had such a fear of one crashing that I would run out and watch them until they were over the horizon to make sure they did not fall on me.

Premonition, foreboding, self-fulfilling prophecy, I don't know. I do know it was planes that took from us those of our family who died in the service of our country.



DECORATION DAY

A year ago we stood on a warm October hill in Pennsylvania at the grave of one of my forefathers. Nicholas Hewitt had spent the winter at Valley Forge with George Washington and his troops. The little church and its graveyard were kept in a lovely, peaceful condition. His little grave lay there with its marker kept like new all these years. Over him waved a flag on a war hero marker.

We visited the cemetery on a hill in Oregon where our ancestors who came in the wagon trains lay all together in the shadow of a large white church. For nearly 150 years some of them have laid there in the neatly kept little cemetery.

Our family has always kept the tradition of Decoration Day, caring for the graves of our loved ones. I remember as a little child the morning of Decoration Day. All the family would come and bring buckets of flowers from their yards. My grandmother took it as a very important task to clean the stones and make a tiny bouquet for each one. Some folks got the more special flowers or the biggest bouquet. Others were not slighted, such as a homeless man my grandparents took in known only as Creek. A most special rose is always chosen for the little Fair Oaks shoemaker Dan Brehm. This past year we made 36 bouquets.

My mother taught us from earliest childhood that the Fair Oaks Cemetery was a place to go to commune with our memories, to find solace and melancholy peace. Often it was to tell a loved person one more thing. We've been known to bring Grampa a limb from one of his fine trees hanging with prize fruit, grieving family have brought cupcakes and licorice. More than once we have made the Christmas Tree into a bird feeder and brought it for the month of January.

Not just on Decoration Day, but any day is a good day for us to make a visit to the cemetery. Not only to visit family, but to remember those of Fair Oaks History who bring to mind such good stories of the olden days.

It is just one more mortal thing we can do along the way to immortality.



WILLOWS

This weekend we purchased some willow furniture. When I talked with the fellow by phone, I told him I was looking for the type of willow furniture that I remember the gypsy people bringing through Fair Oaks in the early days and selling from farm to farm.

This made me think of the willows that grew in such abundance in Fair Oaks when I was a child. As I thought of them, through my mind blew the lovely fragrance of a willow along the river on a hot summer afternoon. A smell no one should go through life without committing to memory.

I thought how much the willows were used in our home as I grew up. Probably the first that would come to mind to anyone who has ever been a child is the fresh green willow stick that a big fat hot dog is roasted on, over an open fire down by the river. Then those of us who were a little piggy would have picked an extra one that had more than one fork on it. We could toast several marshmallows on it at a time. We would pull the sweet brown crust off and stick it in our mouth while we shoved the rest back down toward the coals for another browning. Then, us bad kids would get full and start to catch the marshmallows on fire. When we tired of that, we would poke at the fire and talk and giggle. The smell of the burning green wood was wonderful.

We had a draw down from our house where a creek ran, fed by bubbling natural springs in the early days of Fair Oaks. There was a meadow in the center of the draw where my sisters rode an old horse named Tom around and around. We were cautioned about quick sand so they would get off the horse and walk him past any suspicious spots. I think the quicksand was a tactic of the parents to keep the children in one place. This meadow was surrounded by willows like a huge fort. We often made hideouts in it. There were wild blackberries for our rations. We cut straight long willows and made bows and arrows. My dad showed us how to notch them and string them. We even built a tepee of a sort with willows lashed at the top and old feed bags hung on the sides.

Good straight willows were used for poles for beans and for running sweetpeas up in the spring. Many thin poles were used for knocking almonds.

One of the traditions at Christmas was to pick a bunch of switches for the kid who had been bad. This was always the last task at the end of the busy day of preparations. All the children were sent out on this expedition. (It was while the children were occupied with this important chore that the gifts were all assembled where Santa could get them to his sleigh in the dark.) Usually it was my poor grandfather who got the willow switches and the children all got to laugh and laugh as he would put on the same show of exaggerated dismay every year.

A willow was the standard fishing pole. Fish did not used to be so smart. We could catch nice fat sun perch with a willow branch, a piece of string, some bread and I think, a safety pin. Now the fish are raised in hatcheries and they are too educated to be caught by such primitive poles. My sister says that in 1930 you could even just prop your pole in the ground with some rocks and go and play at the place where Effie Yaw Center is now and come back later and gather up your poles with the fish waiting on the end.

So this morning the cat and I sat out on the sweet smelling willow furniture. I enjoyed seeing the skillfully bent curves of willow, shaping a chair as comfortable as any chair you could name. I thought of the artisan who told me of his gypsy ancestry. I thought of Fair Oaks when it was country.



Weep No More My Willow

My grandmother was a great one for believing in folklore. When she moved into the house on Sunset Avenue she planted a weeping willow tree. She made the folklore prediction that when the trunk of the tiny tree got as big around as her waist that either she or the tree would die.

Everyone watched as the little tree grew and grew. In the winter of 1937 when it was about 17 years old it reached the same size as my grandmother's waist. I can't say I remember which of them was preparing to meet their maker because I was just a few days old at the time.

Sure enough in March of 1937 there was a terrible windstorm and over went the beautiful tree with its gentle flowing branches. I'm sure my grandmother must have breathed a sign of relief.

But, that is not the end of this story. My dad and Uncle Earl got their tractors and pulled the old tree upright and anchored it with ropes. It took root again and flourished.

The last time I saw them both was in the early 1970's. The fragile old woman, and the old tree with just one tiny branch, both still in the race against the Grim Reaper.