

San Joaquin Historian

Newt Robinson: San Joaquin Farmer of the Century, part 1



**A Publication of the San Joaquin County Historical Society & Museum
Spring/Summer 2002**

Vol. XVI, No. 2



The San Joaquin Historian
Quarterly Journal of the
San Joaquin County Historical Society

Volume XVI, New Series
No. 2, Spring/Summer 2002

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Published by
**The San Joaquin County Historical
Society, Inc.**

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San Joaquin County
Historical Society & Museum

Michael W. Bennett, Director

This issue...

Through interviews and correspondence, Newt Robinson has left us a vivid picture of the San Joaquin County farmer's world in the early years of the twentieth century. Always an acute observer and a man of strong opinions, Robinson also delights the reader with his keen sense of humor. In this first portion of a two part *Historian* Newt tells of his boyhood, youth and early manhood on Roberts Island.

The Author...

Isaac Newton Robinson Jr. (1897-2002) lived and farmed on Roberts Island for an entire century. He headed a farming operation that involved forty square miles of San Joaquin County land and consisted of nine farms and four corporations, including a feed company, a land leveling business and a duck club. Robinson was active in farmer organizations such as the Roberts-Union Farm Center, the Woods-Robinson-Vasquez Irrigation District, the California Tomato Growers' Association and the San Joaquin County Farm Bureau. He was also an innovative farmer, being among the first in this area to cultivate tomatoes and to scientifically level his land for better irrigation.

NEWT ROBINSON: SAN JOAQUIN FARMER OF THE CENTURY, PART 1

Even if he had done nothing else in his long life, Isaac Newton "Newt" Robinson Jr. of Roberts Island, who died recently at the age of 105, could likely be remembered as the individual who has lived longest in San Joaquin County. Robinson, who was born on Roberts Island in 1897, holds the distinction of having lived in the county during three different centuries--- a feat which few will ever accomplish.

There is much more to Newt Robinson than his longevity, of course. This visionary Delta farmer, whose energy and foresight drove him repeatedly into roles of leadership throughout his long life, might rightly be dubbed "San Joaquin Farmer of the Century." Robinson headed a farming operation that at various times involved forty square miles in nine farms on Roberts and Union Islands, the Lathrop area and the Rio Blanco and Sing Kee Tracts. Among his many accomplishments were: creation of the Roberts-Union Farm Center; establishment of the Production Credit Association; initiation of the Bracero Program; and, development of the California Tomato Growers Association. During the 1930s Robinson also served as President of the San Joaquin County Farm Bureau and of the County Chamber of Commerce.

Those who knew Newt were well aware of his quick mind and penetrating insights. County Farm Bureau Executive Director Russ Mathews is quoted in Robinson's obituary as saying that "He never hesitated in giving me advice. It was always very welcome and usually right on." Until now, however, few have had the opportunity to savor Newt Robinson's skills as a writer. The County Historical Society is fortunate to have a modest collection of Robinson's

biographical musings. These were sent by their author in his ninety-fifth year as correspondence to a variety of individuals in San Joaquin County. A selection from this correspondence forms a portion of the body of this issue. The Robinson correspondence is augmented by excerpts from the transcript of a 1982 taped interview with Newt (probably conducted by Dr. Dewey Chambers of the University of the Pacific School of Education) on the subject of his boyhood experiences.

Newt's father, Isaac Newton Robinson Sr. appeared in San Joaquin County in 1875. He worked as a teamster on Roberts Island at fifty cents a day for eight years until he was able to make a down payment on the \$48 per acre spread that has been the Robinson family farm ever since.

In a 1992 letter to Stockton attorney, T. J. Hachman, Newt writes:

I do not know all the details of how my father made money. I do know you could not steal it in those days because nobody had much money. He must have been thrifty. He must have had successes and saved his little monies and the money grew through interest.

Mr. Robinson was able to pay off his debt in only six years, but his first wife, prematurely worn out by the rigors of farm life, died leaving him with young children and the necessity to find another helpmate.

Newt relates his perspective on this all-too-common experience of 19th century rural life in the 1982 interview tape at the University of Pacific Library's Holt-Atherton Special Collections:

...A woman was locked up producing children...and the woman worked like a dog My mother worked three times as hard as my father, I'm sure..Children, hard work, and so forth, and all of a sudden a lady is forty years old, tired, weary and dies. The man is still lazy because he goes down to the grog shop and plays cards and drinks while the woman stays home and looks after the children and has the food on the table. My dear sweet mother not only had the food on the table. I can remember my mother making "side" money raising chickens and producing eggs.

In this same interview Newt goes on to make the point that a rural child's life was really very little easier than his mother's:

And I was the little guy, from the time I could hardly crawl, that would go out and hunt for eggs every day. I was the guy who, from the time I was six years old, would be milking a cow. And I was the guy who, at seven or eight years old, was killing and dressing chickens and stuff. I never enjoyed it. I hated it with a passion. I wouldn't take my kids through it when it came along. The day I could get out of milking a cow! It was an economic necessity. Kids today don't know how good they've got it. On the other hand, I never liked those things but I survived, didn't I?

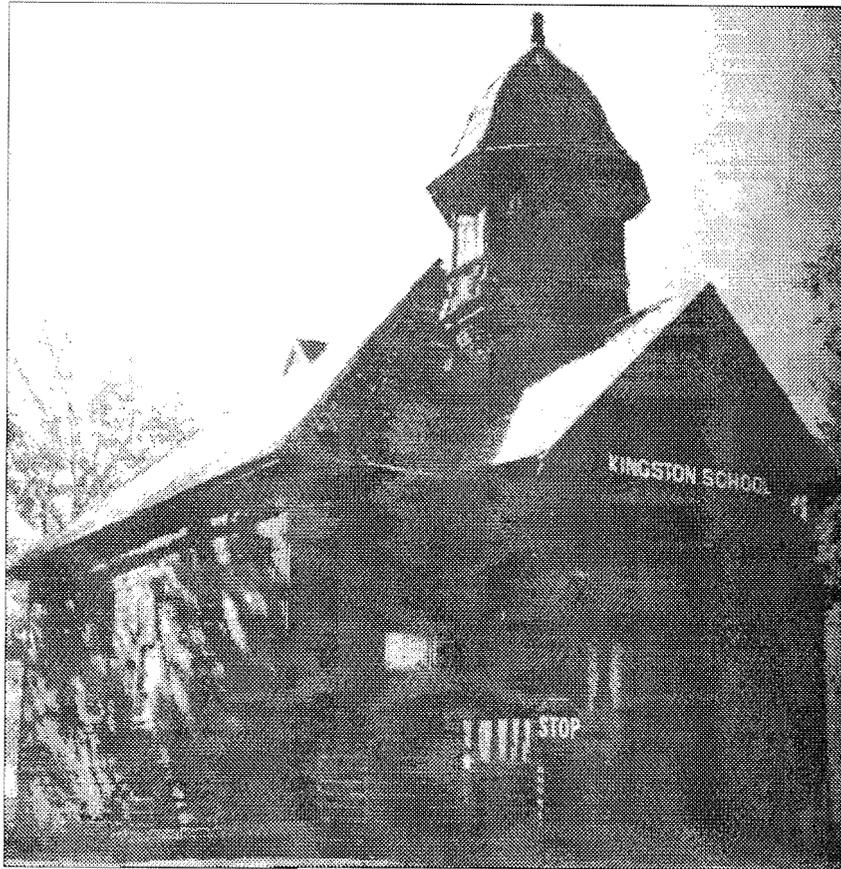
School for Newt Robinson meant, first, the Kingston School on Roberts Island. This one room school house had opened for business in 1880 and continued to function through the 1930s, although by that time daily attendance had fallen below ten students.

I started school in the country at what is known as the Kingston School. The building

is still there. I think it has been classed as an historical monument or something, because of the architecture. And, incidentally, I've become a trustee of this very school and I was the guy that closed up the school and began to believe in consolidated schools in the country.

In those days, take my word for it, you learned nothing. I don't know a verb from an adverb, or a noun from a pronoun. I just know when you're trying to get into my pocket or cheat me or something. I understand that thoroughly.

When I went to school in the Delta, it went from 1st to 8th grade. The teacher...and none of these women were bad people...I'd say they was severely untrained. So you would go into a school and they had six grades. As an illustration...because they may have twelve students to twenty students, as I remember...and the teacher lived, and usually paid a dollar a day for board and room, in one of the farmers' homes. In our own home I can remember a lady, her name was Kale, and I have nothing but respect for this lady, because I had to learn something, and here's the way it was: casino, a little old game. She liked to play casino at night because there was nothing to do but a little old card game. But I had to get my multiplication tables before she would play with me. And mentally I've [since] taken on the college kids...on the business deal and so forth and they've gotta get their computer out and I never care whether I get within \$5 or \$100 of the deal...that's close enough. But I'm there, waitin for 'em to catch up. So I've done pretty good takin' on the educated young men from college just because of this one wonderful great lady.



She was a permanent resident and usually on Friday night she would go to her home in Stockton, or someplace else. There was a great turnover of teachers. Getting a job in the country was just the start of getting some experience so you could go on to another job. So every year we literally had, in my little experience, a new teacher.

I was in grade school in the country for maybe four years, and I'd say I learned nothing outside of this arithmetic. The discipline was practically nil, but there was a close relationship. You'd have a room maybe fifty percent bigger than this and this was the school room...just one big room with a big cast iron stove in it and the teacher always was on a platform six or eight inches high looking at the kids and so forth. They were just as good a kids as the kids now...and most of the kids that I went to

school with were farm oriented and have become very successful farmers, because in those days you didn't need a formal education nearly as much as you do now to survive.

The schooling was terrible and I came into the city schools because we had tragic accidents in our family...deaths and so forth. They should have put me back in the first grade, but they didn't do that. They put me in the fourth grade and I went on. So I didn't catch up until I was eight years old and then it became a breeze to go through high school.

Schooling in Stockton may have been a breeze but the rigors of farm life continued:

We had one medicine that I'll remember always. What do you think it was? Turpentine. Turpentine...if you had any problems...if you got your hand cut....One

time I run a nail into my foot...my mother just got the turpentine and put the can up there like that and held it for about five minutes. They just held the can...and I'm here...every open wound...turpentine.

Colds, I don't remember, but malaria...that was something that was bad...You see that I'm bald-headed? The reason that I am bald-headed: I wanted to be clean and I went swimming in a drainage ditch when I was seventeen years old and I was driving four horses in the country and I paid the price...I got malaria so bad---or typhoid fever. I had a heavy head of red hair...but by the time I was twenty-five I was just as bald as I am now. Malaria, typhoid mosquitoes was prevalent all through this whole Valley area. And I can remember working on harvesters during high school 'cause I could make more money. You'd sleep out in the field and you'd just look up and there'd be a million mosquitoes just that far above your nose. So what could you do? You pulled your blankets down over you.

Newt Robinson always had a soft spot in his gut for food. In his 1982 interview Newt relates in loving detail how to slaughter a pig, cut it up and preserve the meat. Later he describes the colorful rural butcher from whom his mother purchased beef:

He had a horse, he had a van type of thing with a cover over it and he had meat in it. He threw a sack over the meat...it wasn't covered in the back. He had a table and would go from one house to the other. I can remember this man taking a big hind quarter of beef and just slicing with a big long butcher knife. And, of course while all this was going on my mother was there buying a beef and talking: "What's the

neighbor doing...what's Harry doing." This man packed flies from one farm to the next. I can remember the flies...oh, dear goodness...there was nothing to kill them...just take a newspaper...scare 'em outta the way. Nobody died, that's all I know...that I'm here---and I ate that meat. .

To augment their stores of protein the Robinson family made weekly treks to town.

Shopping...Saturday morning...the surry (had a canopy or top on it, a front seat and a back seat)...my father would take my mother and in the winter they'd probably have a dozen bricks that they'd had in the oven the day previous. In the morning they'd wrap those in burlap and put them on the floor of the surry to put your feet on. And you'd have what is called a lap robe...So you'd spend maybe two and a half hours going ten miles from our country home into Stockton with two horses, because in the winter time wheels would be going anywhere from six to eight inches deep in the mud...Now then, we finally got to Stockton...Market and Hunter street...Gianelli grocery store. That grocery store had a monopoly on a lot of the country business from our area, because right there within 200 or 300 feet was a stable. The stable was the same as a garage today. You'd drive your horse and buggy in, there would be one or two men come and take your horses and drive them away. They would put them in stalls and feed them during the day...The eggs and the butter that my mother used to make would be taken over to the grocery store and she would have a list of groceries. She never negotiated for a price, I can remember this, if he didn't offer a fair amount, or what you thought was fair, you'd go someplace else. This

particular person, I think, was very fair. So my mother would place her order and usually it was substantial—all the basics. Big sacks of flour, big boxes of macaroni...heavy food, starch food...All I wanted was calories: meat, potatoes, macaroni. Why? I guess because my body required it...Then my mother would go off to shop and I guess I must have tagged along with her.

But what did my father do? The poor, tired man. There was a saloon...hospitality house...saloon sounds like a bad word...within 300 feet of the stable so he would go over and play Pedro...I don't know how many drinks he would have...You had only probably five hours in the city 'cause it took two and half hours to get there and it took the same amount of time to get back, so between three and three-thirty my mother

would reappear at the stable. And I can remember once or twice my Dad didn't show up and so she had somebody go and roust him out...Now you shouldn't criticize this man, because all the other men were doing it. It was a social center. There was where they talked prices. There's where they talked shop about horses and done some trading---maybe not quite telling each other the truth about a business deal or something 'cause everybody was manuevering for position.

As little Newt grew older he increasingly acquired a wider range of "male" skills.

If you couldn't stand and fight for your own rights nobody protected you. There were no ground rules, and what I even did from the time I got into grammar school was physically fight for my own rights. And



today anybody can have a fight with me anytime. It's never changed: you survived and you whipped the other kid or you didn't. It was just that somebody had to be boss...Somebody to stop you. Nobody cared. And you went on next day to become a friend of the man that was fighting you....

In those days, fishing was not a sport. Hunting, yes. From the time I was six years old I had a shotgun or a rifle in my hands...it's one of the things I still enjoy doing...I remember like yesterday...the ducks were so thick...we had a flood on the Drexler Tract...in 1908, I'm quite sure that's the year. The crops were not harvested and the ducks came in. I can remember in July, August, September, right where we lived--- within a hundred feet of our home--- thousands of ducks...just looked like blackbirds...well, we'd pick 'em and I'm sure that they was roasted...a duck is better roasted than any other way that I know...behind a plow team geese would come up into a furrow to get the worms that was in the soil, so close that you could just shoot a goose and run get it while you were walking beside the plow team. And that's what I did for ten years of my life and I'm not ashamed of it---I'm kinda proud of it.

Somewhere along the way, Newt became interested in baseball. By the time he was seventeen Robinson had begun a part-time career as a semi-pro pitcher in Stockton. He was paid from \$2.50 to \$20 per game, which was a fabulous amount of money for a farm boy in those days.

But then the First World War came along, so I'm young enough to have been in the First World War for a year. And, of course, I had fun chasing girls and playing poker.

Mostly that was my youth, except for going to sea and doing a bit of physical things. But, as for getting shot at, no, then the First World War terminated in a year...fifteen months...

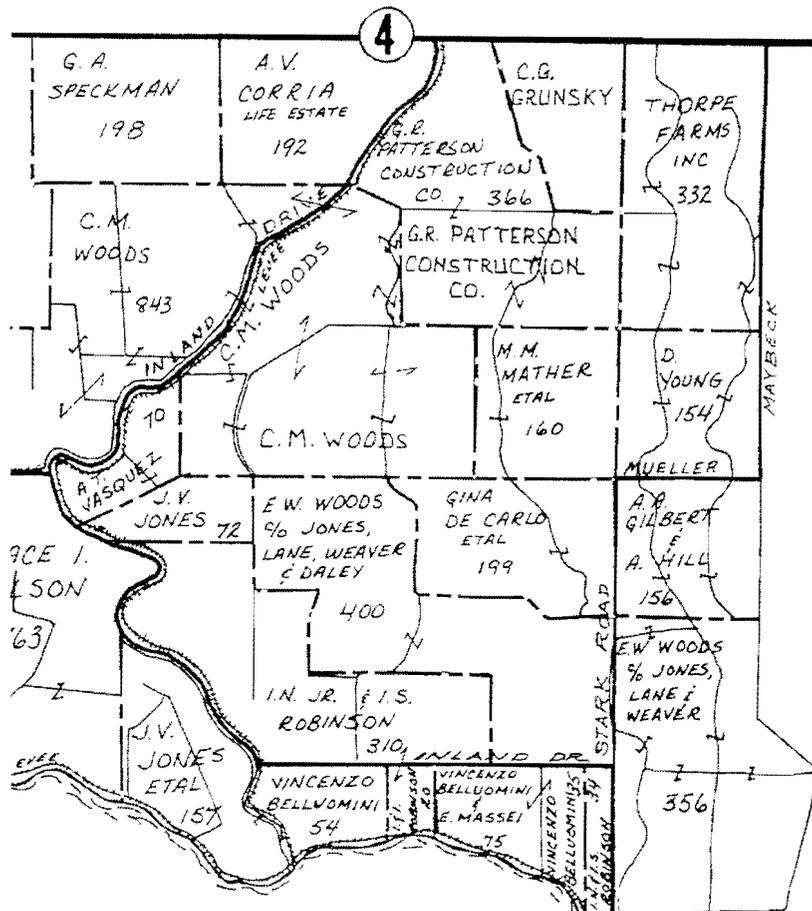
When young Mr. Robinson emerged from the service he had but one goal in mind, to become a farmer. In his 1992 letter to the Klein Brothers Newt describes the situation as follows:

I talked to my father about my dreams. He told me he could not help me financially, he needed all the money he had to live out his life, along with my mother.

My father gave me the finest advice anyone could ever have given. He said, "Go out and get yourself a job in agriculture. The other fellow will be feeding you and paying you some money and you will learn of opportunities through your experiences."

My father could not have been more prophetic. Wages were 15 cents an hour. A horse you could buy for \$100 was worth 50 cents a day in rental. To my way of reasoning, a human being was worth \$300 and a horse \$100...

We had the most serious droughts in 1921 and 1922...In 1925, in spite of all the adversities, I dreamed up the idea of organizing the Woods-Robinson-Vasquez Irrigation System composed of 1500 acres.. You must remember that all the upper division of Roberts Island...and Union Island were very unlevel. This applied to the land in and around where I presently live. We had two big pumps installed. The ditch banks were soft, causing the irrigation boxes we put into the ditch to wash out.



As far as irrigation is concerned, we were in primitive times. We let the water run day and night into big, low swales with high ground in and around the swales. The water could be two feet deep at the deepest part in the swale and it would go 2/3 or 3/4 of the way up on the higher ground. We would turn the pumps off, but there was no drainage system. The excess water, hopefully, would disappear fast. And it did disappear pretty fast.

The next thing we did was take a harrow, anything to break the crust on the ground as the water began to recede. We would follow that with a disc with six horses working abreast. We did anything we could to seal off and hold the moisture.

With horses pulling a bean planter, we then planted pink beans. I have forgotten how many acres you could plant in a day...I was working twelve hours a day in the field

planting beans because if you did not get the beans into the moisture to sprout, you did not get a crop. The result was, you got a weak stand of sickly looking beans on the higher elevations, beautiful looking beans in the middle area. Sometimes you would hit it just right in the bottom of the swale and sometimes you would not.

I would say you had a 60 to 75% stand of beans which would grow to maturity and would make a crop. Some of it would produce twenty-five sacks to the acre, some of it five, and some of it eight. The beans that went five, seven or eight were all shriveled and a poor grade of beans. Unfortunately, they were co-mixed with the number one quality beans...You put the beans in 100 pound sacks. The beans were weighed in the sacks right on the harvester, as it went up and down the rows.

I raised beans about seven years that way

because the dirt moving machines had not yet been invented...

By the end of those seven years Newt Robinson had raised enough cash to buy the family farm from his father. Bean prices had been good. But in 1926 the red spider moved in and beans were no longer a viable crop. The following year, as he notes in the same letter, Newt switched to barley:

I got the barley all planted by the 15th of December. The rains came just right. Lucky Robinson. I got thirty-eight sacks to the acre and...headed for Weber Avenue and the grain dealers.

They tried to steal the barley from me and I walked out on them and they were insulted because I would not sell it to them...Then I went to the Klein Brothers and when they found out that I had 10,000 sacks of barley, they started making love to me. Let me tell you, when the Kleins start putting their arms around you with sweet talk, it is pretty darn hard not to surrender...In spite of all the charm...I told them I must also give Saul and Company a chance to buy the grain.

Well sir, the Sauls were older and more experienced people and they had foreign outlets...The Sauls wanted the barley badly because they were big enough to ship barley from the Stockton Channel to Port Costa, where big cargo boats would come in and load up with grain for export.

I had the gall and guts to go back and forth to each one of them for about three days. I said, "Go and stand on the sidewalk so you can hear each other bid and you will know I am not lying to you when I tell you that you

were out-bid." They did not like what they were doing and neither did I. They knew one or the other of them was going to get the barley because I told them I would sell it to the highest bidder.

To make a long story short, Saul [Klein] bid \$1.60 per hundred weight delivered to the pad adjacent to the Channel, located across the street from his office. I turned to the Sauls and said, "What can you bid?" He said, "I should not do it, but I will bid \$1.625." I turned to Saul [Klein] and said, "Saul, it is your turn." Saul said, "\$1.60 per hundred weight is as high as we can bid." The Sauls won.

Thus, I.N. Robinson Jr. prospered. In 1932 he purchased the first of R. G. LeTourneau's all steel land levelers and soon he was in the land levelling business. Subsequently, he focused primarily on buying, trading and leveling land and growing alfalfa.

A trip east in 1931 had revealed new markets for alfalfa hay to Robinson and, by 1934, sales in that arena had become an important business for him. At the same time Newt entered into a long-term leasing partnership with Dan Chin, who raised potatoes on a portion of the Robinson lands.

Again dry years intervened and because of the increasing salinity of his irrigation water, Newt experimented with yet another crop:

We found tomatoes were much more tolerant of poor quality water than were beans...I was the first person I know of on Roberts Island or on Union Island who raised tomatoes. I think the year was 1935 or 1936. We raised those great big beefsteak

tomatoes. The vines grew so fast and with such vigor that they covered the row on the virgin land so we had a difficult time irrigating them on the final irrigation.

Tillie Lewis talked us into growing the pear-shaped tomatoes for her special purpose... For the next forty years...we raised from 1000 to 1250 acres a year. And with all fairness to my partners, who were excellent farmers, they simply wore out the land. They raised tomato crops so many times in succession that the land needed a rest.

In 1939 Robinson put up a feed mill. The Robinson Farms mill became central to Newt's overall farming operations. He maintained 600 acres of alfalfa at all times to assure a constant supply for the mill. His primary customers, both foreign and domestic, included: horse and cattle breeders; dairymen; riding stables; and racehorse people. By 1970 the mill was processing an average of 1000 tons of feed a month. One sixth of this amount was shipped to South Asia and Latin America.

TO BE CONTINUED

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