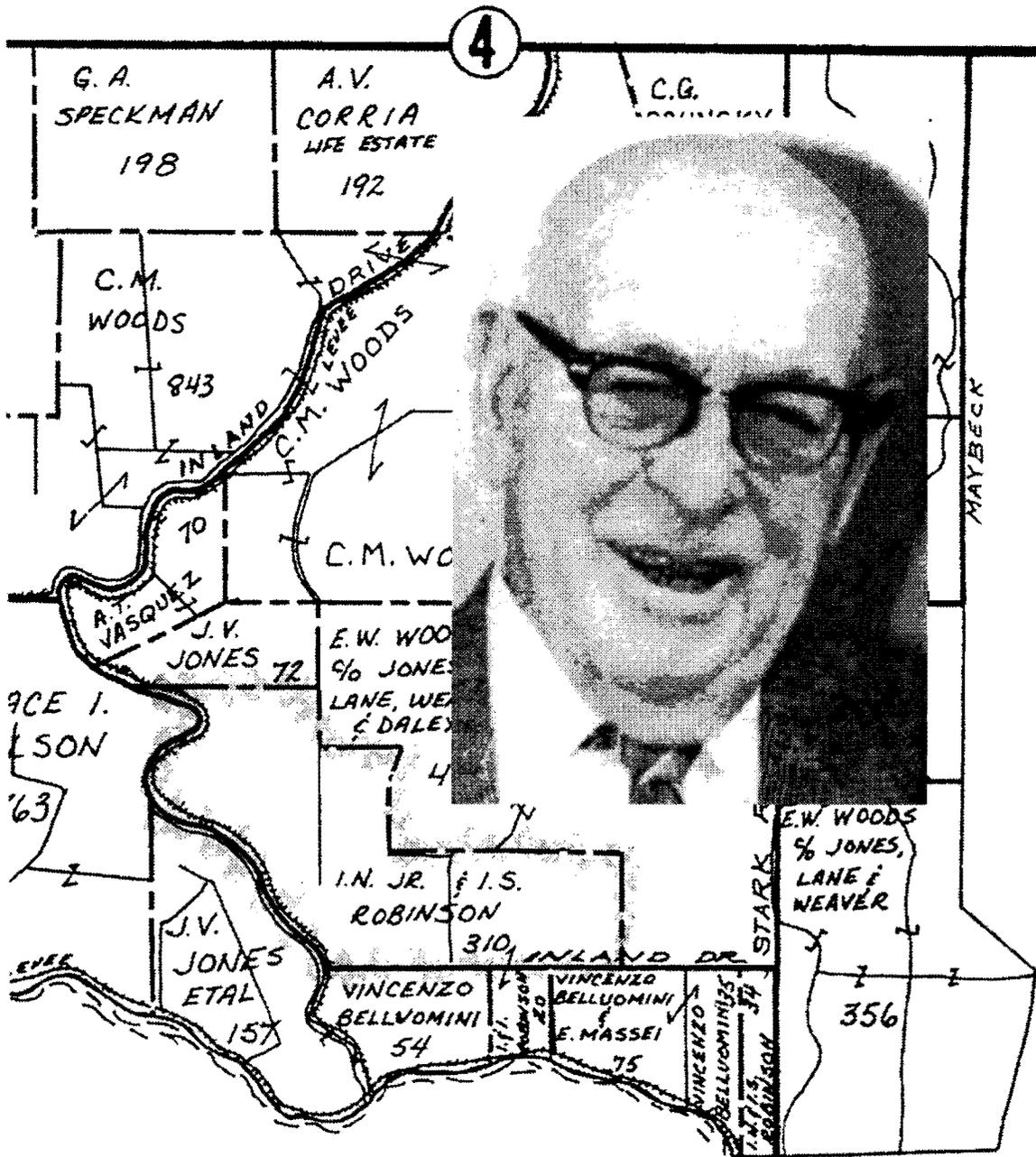


The San Joaquin Historian

“NEWT” ROBINSON MEMORIES, Part II



A Publication of the San Joaquin County
Historical Society and Museum

The San Joaquin Historian

*A Publication of the San Joaquin County
Historical Society & Museum*

Vol. XVI - Number 4



Winter 2002

Editor

Donald Walker, Ph.D.

Published by

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

Micke Grove Regional Park
P. O. Box 30, Lodi, CA 95241-0030
(209)331-2055 or (209)953-3460

President

Christopher Engh

Immediate Past President

Helen Trethewey

Finance

Mel Wingett

Publications

Lisa Dannen

Secretary

Elise Austin Forbes

Treasurer

Robert F. McMaster

**Director, San Joaquin
County Historical Society**

Michael W. Bennett

Newt Robinson Memories, Part II

This issue continues to sample the reminiscences of San Joaquin County Agricultural Hall of Famer, Isaac Newton Robinson, Jr., who died last year at the age of 105. Always brimming with ideas and opinions, Robinson's letters are sometimes exasperating, invariably biased, but always fun to read. The Winter issue prints material from two letters describing Newt's dealings with Charles M. Weber III and Gerald Kennedy, banker husband of Helen Weber Kennedy. The second of the two letters also details Robinson's connection with the Bracero Program and with local farm use of German prisoners of war during World War II.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I.N. Robinson Jr. was born on Roberts Island (1897) and lived his entire life on the family farm. He led the organization of the Roberts-Union Farm Center (1928), was president of the Farm Bureau Federation (1932-34), was instrumental in the creation of the Stockton Production Credit Association, and the California Tomato Growers Association (1947). Robinson also served as president of the San Joaquin County Chamber of Commerce and the Stockton World Affairs Council.

“NEWT” ROBINSON, Pt. 2

Society members will be interested to read Mr. Robinson's descriptions, printed below, of members of the Weber family he knew (and a few other folks along the way).

Let me tell you briefly what I know about Charles Weber III, the grandson of Charles Weber I, the founder of the city of Stockton.

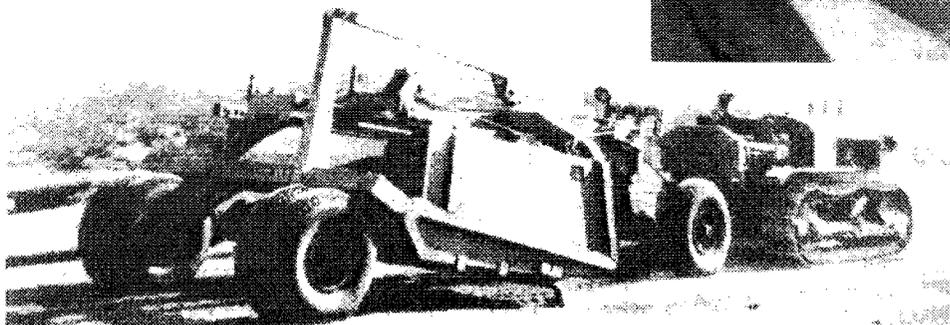
It was about 1932 or 1933 when R. G. LeTourneau, one of Stockton's earliest and most famous inventors of dirt moving machinery, had just finished his contract to help build Hoover Dam. With the extra machinery he had accumulated and created, he moved into a manufacturing facility he had built on Roosevelt Street, which intersects with Wilson Way a short distance north of Miner Avenue in Stockton...

I saw one of his machines being put to work on a county road and I was so impressed I immediately went to R.G. LeTourneau's new manufacturing facility... I introduced myself and told Mr. LeTourneau how excited I was about his land leveling machine for the purpose of leveling farm land. I asked him how I could get my hands on one of his machines.

Mr. LeTourneau sold me a machine for \$3000 to \$4000, but I had no money. I had nothing but a prayer and a strong voice. I signed a note for 8% interest and a purchase agreement for the machine.

Next, I went to the Caterpillar agency and talked to Fred Grimsley, the man who ran the agency on Aurora Street South of Hazelton Avenue. I intro-

R. G. LeTourneau





L.F. Grimsley

duced myself and told him I had no money and I had just made arrangements with Mr. LeTourneau to buy one of his land leveling machines and I needed to get my hands on a tractor.

Fred Grimsley could not have been a finer man. He looked at this hungry young fellow with no money and just an idea. If I could only get my hands on a 60 horsepower tractor with Caterpillar tracks (the biggest they made at that time)...I told him I would prefer a Best tractor, instead of a Holt Caterpillar, and I believed I could be in the land developing business.

Mr. Grimsley asked me why I preferred a Best tractor. I told him I had worked for Caterpillar for ten days when I was younger and I watched how incompetent and inaccurate their engineering was. The man laughed. He said, "Kid, maybe you have something."

In any event, Fred Grimsley was a great man in my eyes, because he believed in this hungry kid. With no money down, I signed a note and a purchase agreement with Mr. Grimsley. I chose a used 60 horsepower Best tractor, which Mr. Grimsley told me was in good working condition. And he was right.

I am in business. I was immediately able to rent this machine for \$5 an hour. I furnished all repairs on the dirt mover and the tractor, plus oil and gas, and paid the labor. I hired a young man from Roberts Island who was ten years younger than myself. His name was Herman Ohm. He worked for me for 20 years and I have nothing but great things to say for this man's ability and his honesty...we never had a quarrel or rough words.

I had taken only four or five small jobs when Charlie Weber III happened to pass by on the road

and see my machine working out in a field and he stopped to look at the work. I can remember that long-legged, hungry young fellow. He did not have any more money than I had. Through inheritance, he did have ownership, or a squatter's claim, on a number of pieces of land in the Stockton area.

Charlie Weber III went crazy when he saw the possibilities of the land I was leveling. He could see the contrast of how it looked before I started and how it looked when I was finished leveling. Charlie hired me to level between 200 and 300 acres of land located on Pacific Avenue and March Lane---where the [Weberstown] Mall is now located. At that time it was just a dirt road and the fields adjacent to it were very rough.

I started to work for Charles Weber III and, my goodness !, nobody had any money. So I learned to stake a field, the way an engineer would do. Then I got lucky. Another man who was out of work shot the elevations for me. Since I did not know how to figure the cuts and fills, I had another man do the figuring and write the figures down for me. With a helper, Newt went to every stake in the field and put the cut or the fill on each stake. Charlie Weber's land was leveled very accurately with the machinery we had.

Now the story gets intriguing... We were almost through working and I said, "Charlie, I have to have some

money. You have not paid me any money so far." Hold your hat on. Charlie said, "I have no money to pay you." By this time Charlie and Newt had become very good friends. I quickly began to crowd Charlie because I was desperate for money.

The man who was furnishing the oil and gas to me needed money. Fred Grimsley needed money. R.G. LeTourneau needed money.

Then finally, in spite of our friendship, I had to get tough with Charlie. I said, "Charlie, I have to have my money. I have done an honest job for you." Charlie said, "I know you have, Newt. I do not have the money." That was our Charlie.

Next I went directly to Fred Grimsley. I told him the truth and he said, "Newt, I know what your position is. I am in the same position." Those are his exact words. He then said, "Charlie owes me money, too." Then I got smart for the first time in my life. I said, "Mr. Grimsley, Charlie Weber III has land scattered all over. If I was to get him to give you a piece of land at a given price, would you cancel out his debt and my debt?" His immediate reply was, "Hell yes, Newt. How can I lose?"

I found a 20 acre piece Charlie owned on Cherokee Lane. I went to Charlie and said, "Charlie, I have made a deal for you with Fred Grimsley. You must sign the papers I bring to you, which deeds the land to Grimsley." Charlie's reply was, "I won't sign the papers."



Charles M. Weber III

I never said a word. The next day, I received the necessary papers from Fred Grimsley for Charlie to sign...I found Charlie and said, "Sign these papers..." His reply was, "I will not." I said to Charlie, "I will file a mechanic's lien on your land and it could cost you thousands of dollars if you try to cheat me."

Next---here is the killer---Charlie reverses face and his personality changed. He signed the papers without a word of comment.

As a result of that episode, Charlie proceeded to sell his dream of a mall to people in Los Angeles. Charlie was king until the developer got him tied into many legal situations and Charlie was squeezed, or cheated, out of a huge fortune. Charlie III was really a delightful man with great ideas...The facts are, Charlie had more brains and imagination than

most people I have met in my life. Charlie would not let practical people change any of his great plans one bit. It had to be Charlie's way only. Remember, Charlie was educated to be an engineer. Business-wise, Charlie acted like a spoiled boy...

After my episode with him, Charlie found Dahl Burnham, my dearest friend, Dahl was patient and much softer and kinder to Charlie than I had been. For 2 or 3 years Dahl packed Charlie on his back financially. Then finally, even Dahl got enough.

Charlie Weber III went to Europe to meet a European girl and married her and they produced 2 sons. Charlie used himself up in Stockton. He moved to Sacramento...Finally, Charlie got old, tired, lonesome and died. I think his 2 sons have completely sold all of Charlie's legal rights to stream beds and channels and then moved to the state of Washington...

One thing for sure, if some of Charlie's plans and dreams had been put into effect, Stockton would be a much nicer and more productive place. Charlie and Newt's relations were good to the very end. Charlie liked to talk and he never seemed offended a few days after a disagreement with him.

Newt Robinson seems to have been a man who always "spoke his mind." The reader will certainly find this true of his passing remarks about Gerald Kennedy, banker husband of Helen

Weber Kennedy, in the following tale of Robinson's involvement with the Bracero Program and German prisoners of war.

The years rolled by and all of a sudden we were suckered into the Second World War. Almost instantly the government placed restrictions on all citizens in regard to purchasing goods and services. Almost instantly farmers had critical shortages of tools and labor needed to do the job the United States government was requesting us to do. What was our job? To produce more foodstuffs.

About 1941 or 1942, the writer had a new idea. The idea was to form a farm labor organization which would make it possible for us to negotiate with the United States government for the importation of men from Mexico to work on our farms.

With the help of the Farm Bureau we formed a labor organization. The writer was made president of the organization. There were four directors beside myself. One was Louis Ruzoni from Italy. When I first talked to him he could speak very little English; however, God gave the man a superior brain and a great heart. The second man was John Lewallen. He had no formal education at all, but was shrewd and had a terrific amount of energy, imagination and resourcefulness.

...The third man to become a director was an employee of the California [Agricultural] Extension Service. I have forgotten his name...

He quit the Extension Service because he too wanted to get in on this increased production, with almost a guaranteed price so the farmer would not go broke...

The first thing the labor association did was start negotiating, with the help of the Extension Service, through a proper agency of the federal government. I have forgotten the name of the agency. The importation of thousands of Mexican workers was accomplished through this association I headed up.

I hired Howard Wilson as a manager. However, we did not have a dollar in the kitty of the association at that time for any purpose.

The man who was manager of the American Trust Company Bank at that time was Jerry Kennedy, a hell of a man. I did business with this bank from the time I was 14 years old. I went to Jerry Kennedy and told him about the labor association we had organized and that I needed to borrow \$1000 for the association to pay wages. He looked at me the way a cold-hearted banker would and said, "Newt, I cannot loan you money for the association. It has not been proven. It has no history. It is against the law to loan money to an outfit like that." Then he said, "Who is heading it up?" I said, "I am." Jerry was taken aback.

I said to him, "Jerry, you do not have to put up money for the association. I will put up the money to finance the association. You know what? I am

going to borrow it from the bank---
your bank---from you.”

I had good credit at the bank. On top of that, Jerry was a good personal friend. We argued about almost everything, but basically we were on the same wavelength, and we remained good friends until his death. That nice banker, Jerry Kennedy, had a quick brain. He looked at me, and I can hear him say it right now, “That SOB has me. He cornered me.”

I owed the bank a lot of money and I was producing different specialty crops which required lots of labor. That shrewd brain of his said, “How am I going to get my money back

from this man if I do not help him hire labor to harvest his crops ?” It was that simple. I can still see his face today. He knew he had trapped himself. He covered nicely by saying, “Newt, whether it is legal or not, I am going to loan you the money because you say it is a good deal.”

That is how we got our financing to start the labor association. Progressively, we hired thousands of men. Then all of a sudden, about 1943, other counties in California and other states also needed Mexican workers and there was another labor shortage. We could not get enough men. I can



Gerald Kennedy

remember being frustrated and going to the Farm Bureau office to find someone to cry to and lean on.

At that time Virgil Patton was head of the Extension Service office for San Joaquin County, which was next to the Farm Bureau office. When I walked into his office there was a lieutenant colonel of the United States Army sitting and talking with him. Virgil got up immediately and introduced me to the lieutenant colonel. He said, "Newt, we have been trying to reach you on the telephone. The colonel has told me he has war prisoners that he needs a home for."

My reply was, "We could sure use them." I have forgotten most of the details of our discussion, but I remember Virgil Patton saying, "Newt, the colonel told me before you came in that the first responsible agency who would put up \$10,000 would get 5000 men at once." The writer, I.N. Robinson, Jr. had \$12,000 in a checking account and had a check book in his pocket.

I pulled the checkbook out and said, "Virgil, you are a witness to whatever I say. Everything I say and the Colonel says must be put in writing and signed by both parties. Who do I write a \$10,000 check to?" ... You could have heard a pin drop for about a minute.

It was just like a high class poker game. The bluff of the big shot Colonel had been called. He had

either to shut up and slink out of that office or be a man....Virgil Patton handled the Colonel. He said, "Colonel, this is a solution to your problem. The army needs the food the farmers have to harvest. I know these farmers in San Joaquin County and what they are doing to produce food. There is no use producing food if there is no manpower to harvest it. If it is not harvested, it will not be put on the boats heading for England." At the end of about 7 or 8 minutes, Virgil made up the Colonel's mind for him that the check could be written by Newt to the United States Army. There was a paper drawn up by Virgil Patton and I signed it as president of the labor association. The Colonel also signed it. That was my receipt for my money.

While the negotiation was going on, I was aware the Army's military buildings at the Port of Stockton were empty. They had been built during an emergency so we could have a debarkation point at Stockton for soldiers being shipped overseas. This worked out very well to begin with. Then later, because of the shortage of smaller boats which could navigate the deep water channel of the Port of Stockton (28 feet deep at low tide) another set of buildings at the Port of Pittsburg was built which could accommodate much larger ships.

Within 10 days, German war prisoners from the Battle of the Bulge began to arrive at the Port of

Stockton. The Army immediately processed them and delivered them in their trucks to various farmers, with instructions from the manager of the labor association.

In my case, I signed a contract through the association we had set up to allow a prison camp to be built on one of my farms, located at the junction of Roberts Road and Bowman Road, 10 miles from Stockton. The camp accommodated 250 men and it was used for 2 years.

At that time, I was operating on a very large scale and could use from 50 to 200 men at various times during the year. Other farmers in the area also used the men.

I remember one human interest event. We had the camp open for about 30 days and we were harvesting tomatoes by hand when a friend of Mrs. Robinson who lived in New York lost her husband. He was a wonderful man who simply overworked himself and was destroyed physically with the war effort and died. This lady, Violet, was impassioned to do something. She flew out from New York to live with us and boss these men during the tomato harvest.

About 10 days after these men had begun harvesting tomatoes, 2 of the men walked on top of the tomato rows and smashed tomatoes when Violet's back was turned. This lady could be a tough New York gal. She

could speak reasonably good German and she said to them in German, "You SOB's, if you ever do that again, I'll blow my whistle and that armed guard will shoot you. He will shoot to kill."

From that day on for the next two years, I never had one bit of trouble with any of the German prisoners. However, we continued to have the military policemen in the fields, always 100 yards from the men, where they could get a large range of people in their gun sights if they needed to shoot. If these Germans wanted to escape, the guards would have shot them...I do not recall the exact time my German war prisoner camp was closed...In any event, all the German war prisoners did a great job of helping the California farmer produce and harvest foodstuffs.

I never had a close relationship with a single prisoner. I was the general. I was the boss. I never said, "good morning," "go to hell," or anything else to them. I would go out into the fields and look right past them. I thought that was the thing for me to do, and it worked.

While I was going through the above experiences personally with a prisoner of war camp on my own ranch, dozens of other farmers who did not operate as big were using men delivered to their farms on the army trucks with armed guards. My relationship with the United States Army was perfect. In fact, I never

had any contact with them at all at a higher level after the prisoners were received at the Port of Stockton. The Army ran a fine operation.

The above text was derived from correspondence penned by I.N. Robinson, Jr. during the final decade of his long life. The account of his dealings with Charles Weber III may be found in a letter to Michael Bennett, Director of the San Joaquin County Museum, dated January 25, 1993. Information about his involvement with Gerald Kennedy, the Bracero program and the use of German prisoners of war during the early 1940s derives from a letter written to Stephen Fox, historian at Humboldt State University, dated November 6, 1992.

These items of correspondence and several others recounting Isaac Newton Robinson's views on San Joaquin County agricultural history and related topics may be seen in the Kennedy Library at the San Joaquin County Historical Museum.

Join Us For
Springtime on the Farm

Friday & Saturday

May 9 and 10, 2003

10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.

At the San Joaquin County Historical Museum

In Micke Grove Park

**Experience Life on the Farm in the 1800's with Demonstrations of
Equipment and Crafts for the Whole Family!**

- **Antique Tractors and Farm Equipment**
- **Special Activities for Children**
- **Farm Animals, Blacksmithing, Gold Panning, Pioneer Chores & More!**

\$5.00 for Adults; \$1.00 for Children 2 to 8 years

For information call (209) 331-2055

Address Correction Requested

**San Joaquin County
Historical Society and Museum**
P.O. Box 30
Lodi, CA 95241-0030

Non-Profit
Organization
**POSTAGE
PAID**
Permit No. 48
Lodi, CA 95241