



RUSSIAN RIVER RECORDER

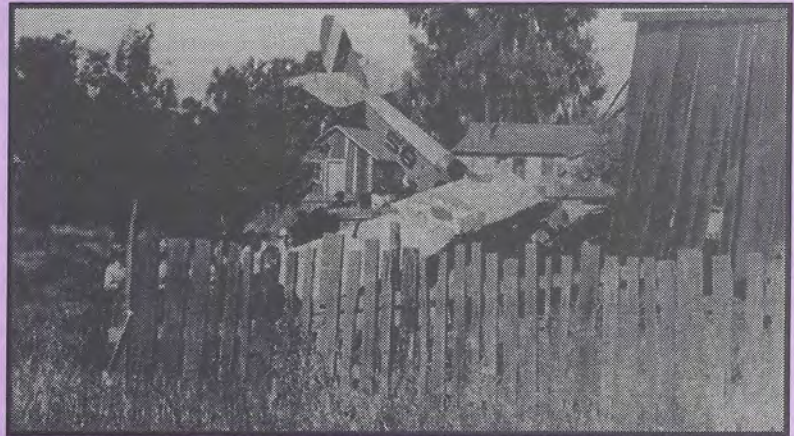
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An Official Publication of the Healdsburg Museum and Historical Society

Flying High: A Brief Overview of Healdsburg's Aviation History

by Marie Shobe

Page 6



First plane to visit Healdsburg crashes

Clubhouses In Healdsburg

Fraternal Societies Worked
to Benefit Their Communities

by June Maher Smith

Page 3



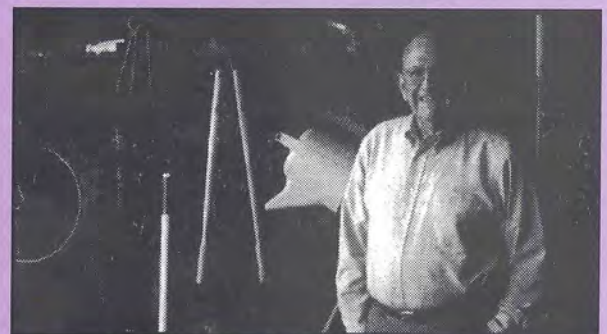
I.O.O.F. Hall after 1906 earthquake

“Caretaker of the Land”:

An Oral History Interview with Robert A.
Young featuring Daughter Susan Sheehy and
Granddaughter Kelly Sheehy.

Edited by Holly Hoods

Page 10



Robert Young, Pioneer Award winner



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RUSSIAN RIVER RECORDER

*The Official Publication of the Healdsburg
Museum and Historical Society*

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IN THIS ISSUE

Aviation in Healdsburg, historic clubhouses and an oral history of a man honored with the Museum's Pioneer Award for his commitment to his community and to his industry are featured in this, the first of four issues of the *Russian River Recorder* for the year 2002.

For our feature article about the early days of aviation, our curator, Marie Shobe, researched the Museum's archives and came up with a very fascinating and well written account. As she points out, it all started with a crash!

You might think that writing an article about historic buildings, particularly clubhouses, would be bland.

But not so. Our June Maher Smith, in her inimitable way, has revealed interesting facts about the buildings and those who were involved with the organizations, a rich part of Healdsburg's past.

And for our oral history portion of this issue, Holly Hoods gives us a heartwarming story of Robert Young, a "caretaker of the land" and the 2002 recipient of the Museum's History Lives/Pioneer Award. We hope that you will find this issue of interest.

Arnold Santucci
Editor

CONTENTS

**Page 3 Clubhouses in Healdsburg
Fraternal Societies Worked To Benefit
Their Communities**

by June Maber Smith



American Legion Hall

**Page 6 Flying High: A Brief Overview
of Healdsburg's Aviation History**

by Marie Shobe

**Page 10 "Caretaker of the Land":
An Oral History Interview with
Robert A. Young, Featuring
Daughter Susan Sheehy and
Granddaughter Kelly Sheehy.**

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Redmen's Hall

HISTORIC



Regiment's Hall

BUILDINGS

Years ago, before the days of TV, computers, and our rapid ways of life, people relied on many different clubs and organizations to provide the chance to socialize with others of similar interests. These fraternal societies worked to benefit their communities and many of them provided some health and death benefits to their members. It is estimated that by 1890 one man in every ten was a member of some organization. Among the societies in Healdsburg in 1898, as mentioned in the *Healdsburg Tribune*, were the Masons, Eastern Star, Odd Fellows, Rebekahs, Knights of Pythias, Druids, G. A. R. and Ladies of the G. A. R. (Another society, the Improved Order of Red Men, was evidently not active in 1898.) Four of these organizations built their own clubhouses, or halls, in downtown Healdsburg, and two of the buildings still stand today. (Please remember as you read this article that Powell Street is now Plaza Street, West Street is now Healdsburg Avenue, and South Street is now Matheson Street.)

FREE & ACCEPTED MASONS

The Free & Accepted Masons is a long-time Healdsburg fraternal organization. Sotoyome Lodge has met for almost 90 years in their present building on the corner of Center and Plaza Streets.

In 1875 an article in the *Russian River Flag* stated that the Masons owned a lot on the west side of the Plaza and would soon build a two-story building. The new structure would incorporate their old quarters. Sargent's Shoe Shop and Wentzell's Barber Shop were moved to make room for the new edifice, which would be known as the

CLUBHOUSES IN HEALDSBURG

By June Maher Smith



John N. Bailbache, first Master of Masonic Lodge, 1857

Masonic Block. By 1891 local entrepreneur Henry Fox owned the building. At that point the second floor not only housed the Masonic meeting room, but the Knights of Pythias meeting room, a hall for dances and entertainment, and Dr. E. W. Biddle's dental parlors. Downstairs two grocery stores vied for customers, one belonging to John Snow and the other to Joseph B. Prince.

Moving along to 1913, The *Healdsburg Tribune* reported that Eli Bush and George Miller bought Peters' corner at Center and Powell Streets. They planned to tear down the old wooden buildings there and erect a two-story building. The next year the new building bore the inscription "Masonic Temple" and the Masons had a lease on the upper story. Downstairs, James Skee had his furniture store, and C. E. Curtis opened his funeral parlor on the Powell Street side of the building.

In early 1919 the building was heavily damaged by a fire. Spectators were able to rescue some of Skee's furniture and he moved his store over to the Odd Fellows building. Curtis found quarters for his business on Center Street. Also displaced were Dr. Stone and Dr. Beeson, who was in the process of opening his dental office there after serving in World War I.

Continued page 4



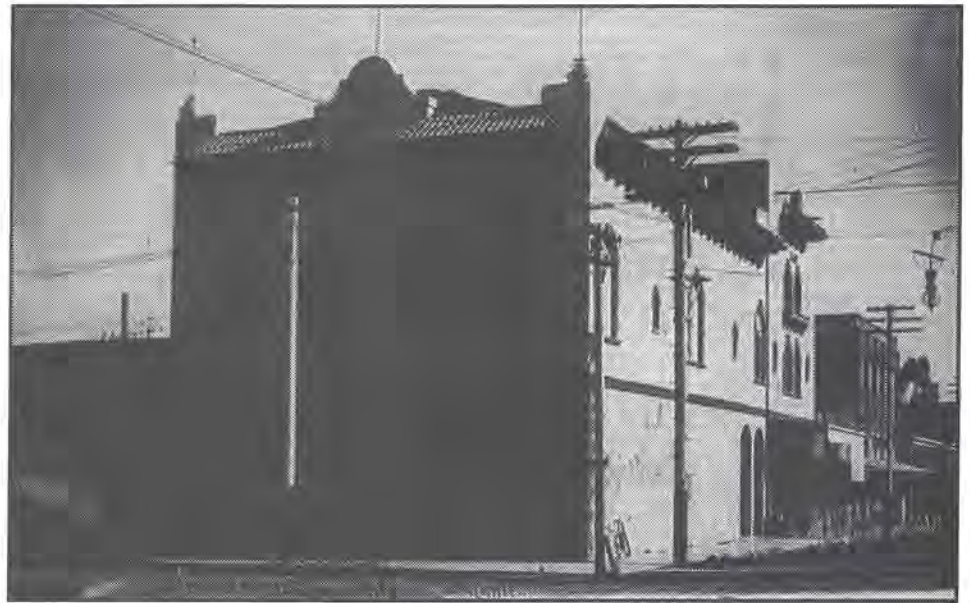
Masonic Temple, corner of Center and Plaza Streets, photo circa 1940

Continued from page 3

The Sotoyome Lodge of Masons bought the building from Eli Bush in April of 1923. They have cared for this attractive building over the years since then. It doesn't show its age and is kept in good repair. It is the meeting place of other Masonic affiliated groups such as Eastern Star, Rainbow Girls and DeMolay. Over the years the Masons have rented the ground floor to many Healdsburg businesses—a grocery store, furniture and office supply stores, and frozen food lockers to name a few. Currently, the coffee at the Flying Goat and the furniture and accessories at Pentimento attract both residents and tourists to this corner by the Plaza.

INDEPENDENT ORDER OF ODD FELLOWS

One of the earliest organizations to come to Healdsburg was the Odd Fellow Lodge. This group, Annally Lodge No. 64, was originally formed in 1857 in Bloomfield. When the membership there dwindled in 1863, a small group of five men from Healdsburg became members, voted to move the lodge, and the next day packed the paraphernalia in a wagon and brought it here. As of May 6, 1864, the Grand Lodge in Sacramento gave permission for Lodge No. 64 to change its name to Healdsburg Lodge. In 1868 the Lodge had a membership of between 40 and 50 men. By 1869 they had fitted up a meeting room in McManus' brick building and were looking forward to building on their property at the corner of South and West Streets, which had cost them \$2,400. In 1872 they had built two stores on this property south of the Plaza, a shoe shop and a book store. Four years later the meeting hall was being built, and in 1900 it was lighted by electricity. The women's group, Liberty Rebekah Lodge, was established in April, 1884. In the late 1800s and early 1900s the deep, cool basement under the building was used by Young's Funeral Parlor for storage of corpses during the hot summer weather. In 1903 the Lodge bought the property to the south on West Street where a grain mill stood. They erected a three-story



I.O.O.F. Hall, corner of Matheson Street and Healdsburg Avenue, now the Brandt Insurance Building, circa 1905 before the earthquake.

building on the new lot and combined it with the original two-story building. Contractors Stanley and Sawyer finished the enlarged building in 1905 at a cost of \$15,000. Within a year the 1906 earthquake demolished the front portion of the building and Stanley and Sawyer were called upon to rebuild it. It wasn't until 1936 that the Lodge was able to finally burn the mortgage.

The Odd Fellows celebrated their 100th anniversary in 1957 with a "well rounded program," including remarks by visiting dignitaries, refreshments, and dancing. Officers at that time included Edward Brigham, Dr. B. M. Peixoto, Harold Hoskins, Manuel Lownes, and Iver F. Iversen.

Brandt Insurance had offices in the building since 1974, and in January of 1995 the Brandt brothers bought it from the I.O.O.F. Two years later they temporarily moved their business, gutted the building and retrofitted the structure. They moved their offices back to the enlarged third floor in 1998, and rented out offices on the second floor and stores on the street floor. They also installed Healdsburg's first three-story elevator. In

1999 the Healdsburg Museum & Historical Society presented its Best Commercial Restoration Award to the Brandt brothers for the renovation of this prominent landmark across from the Plaza.

The Odd Fellows and Rebekahs are still active groups, both holding their meetings in Windsor.

IMPROVED ORDER OF RED MEN

The Improved Order of Red Men claims to be the oldest fraternal organization in America which had its start in this country. Its roots go back to pre-Revolutionary days when secret societies such as the Sons of Liberty, Sons of Tamina and the Red Men were in existence. Despite the name, members do not have to be Native Americans or of Native American descent, and Indian regalia is worn only during special ceremonies. Each group is known as a "tribe." They believe in Freedom, Friendship and Charity and they aim to keep alive the customs, ceremonies and philosophies of the Native Americans. The organization is still active today, although not in Healdsburg.

Continued page 5

In December of 1888 the Umatilla Tribe was instituted in Healdsburg with 32 charter members. It was a long evening—the ceremony took place in the Odd Fellows Hall followed by a dinner, toasts and speeches at the Sotoyome House. The Umatilla Tribe was replaced by the Sitting Bull Tribe in 1900. In 1906 the April earthquake destroyed the Red Men's Hall on West Street. The lodge rooms were on the second story and James A. Brown sold buggies and wagons downstairs. Brown had the building rebuilt and offered the Red Men a long-term lease at a low price. The contractor, J. W. Carter, finished the second story to accommodate the Red Men's meetings. In 1907 they dedicated their new hall, complete with men's waiting room and ladies' waiting room. There was a kitchen and a 30' x 50' banquet room suitable for dancing parties, concerts and other entertainment. Disaster struck again in 1913 when the building burned. The Red Men continued to make regular payments on their building loan, however, and were able to burn the notes securing it in 1914. That ceremony took place in the Masonic Hall with refreshments and a program for all members and their families. The Red Men, and their women's organization, Pocahontas, were still meeting in Healdsburg in 1927. That year George Fitch was installed as Prophet of the Red Men and Georgie Cole was installed as the Prophetess of the Toakawa Council Pocahontas group. Several Tribes were still active in California in the 1940s but I didn't find any reference to the Healdsburg Tribe after 1927.

AMERICAN LEGION POST #111

Healdsburg's American Legion Sotoyome Post was founded by World War I veterans in 1919, immediately after the end of the "war to end all wars." This active group lost no time in getting their own clubhouse. They started a fund drive in 1920, chose the property on Center Street for their building site, bought the Koberg lot and poured the foundation in 1921. The men

were proud of their building and did a lot of the construction work themselves under the direction of a head carpenter. Both the American Legion Post and its women's Auxiliary had separate meeting rooms, with fireplaces, in opposite wings of the building. The large auditorium had a balcony, a modern stage and was equipped for motion pictures. The building itself, sans furnishings and cost of the lot, was an investment of \$22,000. Of that sum, \$17,000 was subscribed by the people of Healdsburg and the surrounding area. The grand opening on September 30th, 1922, was quite an affair: formal dedication ceremonies in the afternoon, followed by an open house. Then, at 8:30, there was a grand ball with music furnished by an orchestra from San Francisco. Even the local businesses, which usually stayed open late on Saturday nights, closed at 7 p.m. so their customers could attend the festivities.

The American Legion Hall was a popular place for local dances and entertainment such as amateur theatricals. The Kiwanis Club held their noon meetings there and the Auxiliary ladies served them lunch—a tradition which still continues on a monthly basis. When the Healdsburg Grammar School building was condemned because of earthquake fears in 1933, classes continued at the American Legion Hall. For a year and a half there were five "classrooms" in the auditorium, one in each corner and one on the stage. By staggering the school hours—younger children attended one-half day in the morning, the older students came in the afternoon—they all received their education. Every year on Memorial Day in May the Legionnaires gathered at the hall and marched out to Oak Mound Cemetery, followed by students, youth groups and others, to conduct services.

In 1927 the Legionnaires applied to the War Department for cannons to display in front of their building. The next year three cannons with carriages were shipped to Healdsburg from the Benicia Arsenal. The

old siege howitzer and the two siege mortars were installed as planned. They remained in place until World War II.

The Mitchell Shopping Center now occupies the American Legion site along Center street. The hall was torn down along with the Women's Improvement Club nearby. The Fire Station next door was reincarnated as the Boys and Girls Club Building on Piper Street. ♦

Sources:

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And: Jack Relyea, Neil Iversen, Milton Brandt, Jack Brandt, June Fiege.

HISTORIC



Lewis Norton

INDUSTRY

FLYING HIGH: A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF HEALDSBURG'S AVIATION HISTORY

By Marie Strohe

On December 17, 1903 the first powered flight in a heavier-than-air machine took place. Orville and Wilbur Wright had modified a glider, by adding a self-built engine (12 horsepower) and engine propellers. The flight on December 17 in the "Kitty Hawk Glider" resulted in a 120-foot, 12-second flight.

Soon after this historic flight aircraft companies were founded all over the world, the first being outside Paris, France. The first U.S. company was founded in New York. The Wright Brothers performed their first official flight in 1908. The first scheduled air service began in Florida on January 1, 1914. Basically, in a short amount of time, aviation became a part of life.

Healdsburg's aviation experiences started early, in 1909, and have continued in many ways ever since.

Healdsburg's Aviation History started with a Bang (a Crash) - Literally!

"For the first time in its history, Healdsburg will be visited by a flying machine tomorrow night or Saturday morning." (HT 7/3/1919)

Aviation did not come to Healdsburg until 1919. The first plane to land in Healdsburg was piloted by Army Lieutenant Fred Young. Excitement was high in Healdsburg preceding the visit by Young who was flying in on a military Jenny, or, as the newspaper called it, a "government flying machine."

Fred Young was a Healdsburg native who had enlisted in the Army in 1918. He was sent to flight school in San Diego, and became a flight instructor stationed at March Field in Riverside, southern California.

In 1919 Young completed an aviation skill exhibition at the Tulare Fourth of July celebration. After those festivities he headed for Healdsburg. Upon reaching the Healdsburg skies he treated observers to an impromptu airshow - reaching a height of eight thousand feet, he completed nosedives, glides and end-on-end maneuvers



Army Lt. Fred Young crashes his plane in Healdsburg, 1919.

to within a few hundred feet of the ground (HT 7/10/1919). Young landed his plane on Luce field, which was not an airfield, but a baseball field (and is where Recreation Park is now located). He was greeted by his parents and by his wife, who had made the trip to Healdsburg to meet him. Since it was nightfall, stakes and ropes were placed around the plane for the night and R.K. Truitt stood guard.

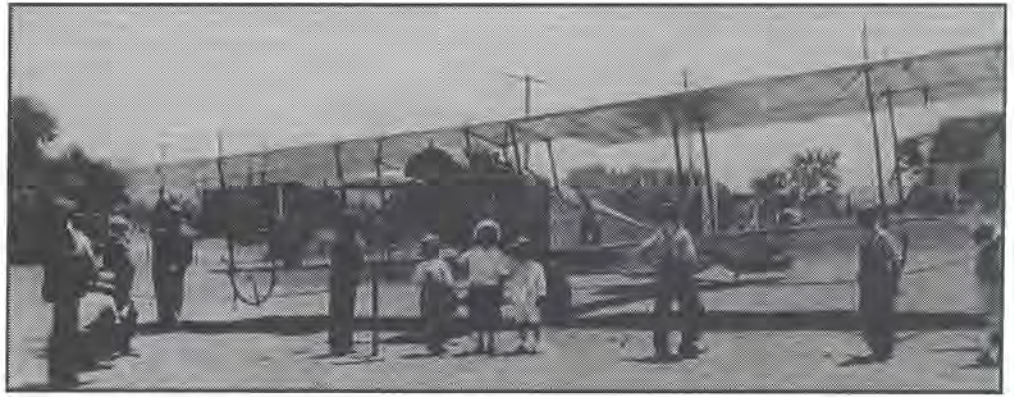
On Sunday morning Young took to the skies in order to give the townspeople of Healdsburg a flying exhibition. When he started off from the field he did not get high enough to clear some telegraph lines. He managed to fly the plane under the wires, and proceeded with his show, and the "big, graceful creation, seemingly a creature of life and volition, soared away into the sky, its whirring motor proclaiming its confidence of its supremacy over the perils of the air" (HT 7/10/1919). Fred entertained the crowd with loops, and end-on-ends, falling leafs and other stunts.

Fred was scheduled to leave Healdsburg the next morning. Upon his ascent, he again could not get the big plane over the telegraph wires. He tried the same thing as the day before, diving under the wires, but this time, one of the plane's wings hit the top of an oak tree as Young was waving good-bye. The plane was knocked out of Fred's

Please see page 7

Continued from page 6

control and crashed into the Goodrich barn at 556 Matheson Street. Young jumped out of the plane unhurt, but the plane itself was a wreck. The downed plane was surrounded by onlookers who "stood around and commented on the plane, so impotent now, where but a few hours before it had represented a triumph of the genius of man in conquering the air, a herald of a power that was the consummation of centuries of dreaming and of invention" (HT 7/10/1919).



Healdsburg was visited by a flying machine piloted by Army Lt. Fred Young in 1919.

After the crash, a banquet sponsored by the Elk's Club was held in Young's honor at the Plaza Hotel. The next day Young and the plane went home by rail to March Field.

Flying Machines Continue on the Hall Ranch

"All express themselves as delighted with the experience and say there is no doubt of flying being before long the proper mode of navigation." (HT 7/12/1919)

Close on the heels of Fred Young's entertaining weekend was another plane, flown by Lieutenant B. M. Spencer of the Pacific Aviation Co. He came to Healdsburg for a few days to take passengers up into the clouds in a Curtiss biplane. No stunts were attempted.

Spencer flew to Healdsburg from Napa on Monday, July 8, and did not know where he was going to land. From the air he spotted Fred Young's plane on the Luce ball field. He landed there, but realized that the field was not a good take-off area. He flew out to the C.C. Hall Ranch in Alexander Valley and found it an ideal field for landing and taking off.

Those daring enough to go up in the small plane included: J. Herbert Amesbury, Conway Hall, R.G. Cook, A. Hartz, L.A. Kahrs, Leland McClish, L. Zerillo, Miss Gretchen Hall, R.D. Grant, L.M. Norton, L.P. Enzenauer, Mrs. W. R. Ferguson, E. A. Poe, A. W. Garrett, Ernest Meyer, C.C. Heaton, Guy Rose, Miss Ethel Gater, R.W. Patteson, Herbert Mothorn, and M. Earle Adams. Adams was the editor of the *Healdsburg Tribune* at the time, and some of his observations included: Fitch Mountain "looked like a mighty small haystack;" the new Healdsburg High School "looked like a lump of sugar on a green carpet;" and the hills between Healdsburg and the coast "looked like flat country." (HT 7/10/1919).

The Hall Ranch continued to be an airfield for many years.

Barnstorming and a Tragic End

"The crowd of spectators, the number of people who raced for the landing place as the airplane concluded its spectacular flight, the remarks of the people about the "treat" Eldridge was giving his passengers, added a grim aspect to the tragedy." (HT wkly 8/11/1921)

During and after WWI a large number of entrepreneurial aviators bought cheap war surplus trainer airplanes and traveled around the country barnstorming and giving airplane rides. In the Healdsburg area flyers used the Hall ranch and also a small strip southwest of the city (where the Healdsburg Corporation Yard is now).

In August 1921 one of these flying trips ended in tragedy. Former local Alden "Spike" Eldridge from Oakland came to town in his military Jenny, and took passengers for \$10 rides. He took two locals, Kenneth Hudson and Bert Fairbanks, up in the plane, and began doing stunts. Many of the flying tricks took place low to the ground, including a pass over the Plaza, when the passengers waved to the crowd. Upon nearing the airfield southwest of town, the plane appeared to stall and dove into the ground - in the Cochrane apple orchard on the Curtis property near the strip. The plane burst into flames, and all three occupants died.

Plane Service to S.F.?

"He is of the opinion that such a service will be a successful venture and that it will do a good business. It will provide rapid transportation between this city and San Francisco, and would be invaluable to local business men with urgent business in the city, requiring rapid trips between Healdsburg and the bay region." (HT wkly 4/13/1922)

Please see page 8

The fiery end of Eldridge and his passengers did not deter people from the possibilities that air travel offered. A good example of this is that of George Ludue, who planned to purchase a powerful airplane, establish a municipal landing in town, and start a Healdsburg - San Francisco air passenger service.

Ludue, who was one of the proprietors of the Republic Machine Shop, was a former army pilot and a member of the Ninety-first Air Reserve Squadron. He wanted to establish a landing field near the Russian River bridge. There would be one plane in service. It would leave twice daily, once in the morning and once in the afternoon. A round trip ticket would cost \$20.

Instead of establishing an airfield by the bridge, Ludue secured take off and landing privileges at the Conway Hall Ranch in Alexander Valley without cost. The ranch was also being used at that time as a flight base for the aerial forest patrol.

Ludue's flights between Healdsburg and San Francisco were supposed to start in July of 1922. A quick glance through the newspapers of that time does not indicate anything of the sort. The answer to whether or not it happened is subject to more research.

Paul Rued and Healdsburg's First Licensed Airport

"In the 1930's and 40's Healdsburg was the home of a colony of pilots and the small planes with which they criss-crossed the skies. At the center of this activity was one man, Paul Rued, rancher and life-long flier." (HT 8/14/1985)

Paul Rued was born and raised in the Alexander Valley and wanted to fly from the moment he saw a plane. Paul was taught to fly by Fred Lencioni of Healdsburg in a Model 1 Fleet Plane. Eventually Rued bought a J-2 and kept it on the ranch in Alexander Valley. Soon, other people bought planes and asked to keep them on the ranch - "One thing led to another and before you knew it we had a whole colony of planes" (Rued as quoted in the HT 8/14/1985).

Rued's airport started out as a grassy strip in a pasture on his Alexander Valley Ranch in 1937. He started giving flying lessons. WWII put a stop to all civilian flying in the area. The government prohibited private flights within 150 miles of the coast because of the fear of Japanese attacks. Rued's airport was shut down from 1942-1945. During this time Rued went to teach flying at a school in Ely, Nevada. Upon returning home from Ely he had to land in Grass Valley, dismantle his plane, and haul it back to Alexander Valley (because of the government regulations) (HT 8/14/1985). Rued then signed on as a flight instructor for the Army Air Corps for the duration of the war.



In front of the plane at right Jim Athey poses with his son at the Healdsburg Airport. On the right is Paul Rued and on the left Jim Pavel. Circa 1940.

After the war Rued returned to his ranch in the Alexander Valley. He continued to give flying lessons. Burnett Bidwell was one of Rued's first students after the war. Burnett and his brother Duke (who also became a pilot) owned and operated Aladdin Cleaners in the 1950's and 60's. The Bidwell Brothers helped Rued build a hangar on the Rued ranch. They used materials from an old garage that was situated on the corner of Matheson and East Streets. The hangar held eight airplanes. Rued's airport operated until 1963.

Healdsburg's Very First Municipal Airport

"Anyhow: there were more planes in this vicinity last weekend than ever before." (SS 6/5/1941)

Shortly before America's involvement in WWII Healdsburg opened up a municipal airport.

The subject gets interesting and puzzling when the local newspapers are consulted. According to the *Sotoyome Scimitar* in May of 1941 the Healdsburg City Council negotiated a lease acquisition of a fifty-acre tract of land to be used as a municipal airport. The property was leased from Louis Heitz for \$10 a month, and was located three miles north of Healdsburg, and was "less than five minutes drive from Healdsburg's business center directly down the famed Redwood highway" (SS 5/22/1941) (which would put it in the Alexander Valley). The paper explains that work on the airport, putting it into shape for use, was to start immediately, and County Supervisor Joe Cox made arrangements for the rental of county equipment for construction work.

However, the old-timers and long time locals recall the airport as being around the vicinity of March and University Streets, where Healdsburg General Hospital is now situated. Some refer to this airfield as Athey Field, named after one of the founders, Jim Athey. In fact, no one disputes the identity of the movers and shakers that

Please see page 9

labored to get a working municipal airport. They included: Edward R. Norton, John Condit and James Athey, and Bill Wolking.

Oral history accounts say that Jim Athey, who was on the Chamber of Commerce Aviation Committee in 1941, got a lease to the land where the hospital now sits, graded a strip and started the airfield in late spring of 1941.

Why the location switch and what actually happened in the two weeks between the announcement of the airport in the papers and the next article about the open airport is up for further research. But over the next few weeks there were many updates about the airport in the papers. By June 5, many out-of-town visitors were already using the airport. The airport was said to be able to handle Piper Cubs, Aeroncas, Light Cruisers, Tailor Crafts and Stimson 105's. The 1300 foot runway was of sod, and "drainage will be necessary because of low spots in the field, water is apt to remain on the field" (SS 6/9/1941).

First Plane Is Housed at Airport By Local Man (HT 6/23/1941)

In a somewhat appropriate first, the Healdsburg Tribune reported on the first plane to live at the new airport:

Jim Athey last week "moved in" to Healdsburg's new airport and has the distinction of being the first airplane resident of the port here. Since its opening and since the extensive work on the field by local resident, the airport has had a continual stream of visiting planes each weekend.

Athey, according to reports has become so accustomed to landing in the semi-limited space that he has become a "spot lander" and amazes Santa Rosa airport flyers by the way he brings his plane in on that field with several hundred feet to spare despite the fact



Norton Sky Ranch, summer 1945. On the left Joe Thompson and on the right Jim Athey, owners of Thompson and Athey Flying Service and founders of the Norton Sky Ranch Airport.

that there are no brakes on his plane.

The young airport did not have a chance to grow. As stated earlier with the outbreak of WWII for the U.S. at Pearl Harbor, U.S. government regulations prohibited all general flying 150 miles inland from the coast.

The last plane to take off from Healdsburg's first airport was that of a Santa Rosa flyer, S.R. Foggs, Jr. The date was December 8, 1941. The runway was too muddy to take off from, so the flyer used a gravel road that was next to the strip (Anderson).

The Norton Sky Ranch

"My brother and myself, who have both been flying for many years, reasoned that a community the size of Healdsburg should have a good airport, and the project when completed filled our highest expectations." (Lew Norton in a letter to the HT 9/6/1951)

Due to the war all general aviation in the Healdsburg area was stopped. After the war, there was a push to open or reopen airports and take to the skies again.

Healdsburg's first airport site was considered inadequate for a larger airport, and a new site was found. Jim Athey and Joe Thompson, along with Ed and Lew Norton - with the help of Waldo Iversen at Public Works - graded a landing strip on the Norton brothers' land bordering on and south of Lytton Springs Road. "A large wooden hangar was built, several training airplanes were procured, and a flying service was started - primarily to instruct the large numbers of returning war veterans who wanted to learn how to fly under the auspices of the new GI Bill" (Anderson). Thompson and Athey ran this flying service. Adding to the use of the airfield was Healdsburg High School's "Aviation Science" class, taught by Jim Voght. This class provided more students for the flight school.

The airport was booming in the decade after the war. However, after the GI students graduated, activity at the airport slowed down. In fact, in a letter to the *Healdsburg Tribune* in 1951 Lewis Norton suggested that the City of Healdsburg take over the maintenance of the Norton Sky Ranch Airport in order to keep it open for public use. Norton cited the fact that private flying seemed to have dropped off, and no one at that time was operating the airport. They suggested that the airport either be closed for good, or



Lewis Norton

Continued page 10

ORAL



Robert A. Young, 1937

HISTORY

"Caretaker of the Land": An Oral History Interview with Robert A. Young

*featuring daughter Susan
Sheehy and granddaughter
Kelly Sheehy*

edited by Holly Hoods

When Alexander Valley pioneer farmer Silas Young died in 1935, his only son Robert was 16 years old. Robert, barely out of high school, took over running the family prune ranch full-time. In 1940, he married Gertrude Rollisberger, a young woman from a neighboring farm family. The Youngs had four children: JoAnn (born 1942), Susan (b. 1947), James (b. 1952) and Fred (b. 1953). Like their parents, they grew up picking prunes.

After decades of raising prunes, Robert Young became one of the first grape growers to usher in the new era of wine agriculture in the Alexander Valley. He planted the first Cabernet Sauvignon grapes in 1962, followed by Chardonnay in 1967. The Youngs continued to grow and sell grapes, increasing their acreage and improving the quality of the harvests. In 1997, the four Young grown

children launched the Robert Young Estate Winery.

Gertrude Young, much loved, died of cancer in 1988. The whole family was delighted when Robert was blessed with a happy second marriage to Donna Rumsfelt Watts. Donna, a good friend of Robert's only sister Marion, had cared for Gertrude Young during her illness and had become close to the family. Robert and Donna were married in 1990.

In 1994, Robert had a stroke while fishing in Canada, which has impaired his speech and mobility, but not his spirit or determination. He considers himself a fortunate man, and openly cherishes his family, and the land and life they share.

Robert Young:

I was born in 1919. My dad, Silas, got here [in 1886] with his parents when he was two years old. He was born in Verona, New York. When his father, Peter, come up here, my grandma Rachel (Kazanstein) come out too.

Susan Sheehy:

Peter, Dad's grandfather, actually came to California a couple of times. The very, very first time, he came out for exploratory. He followed his older brother Michael out here. And then, my understanding was, the parents were still in New York. Peter went by way of Oregon back to New York.

Continued page 11

Continued from page 9

that the City take over the operation of the airport.

In 1958 a reservoir was completed and winter rains filled the lake on the west side of the strip. The California Division of Forestry used the strip and the lake for a while, and crop dusters also used the field.

Healdsburg Municipal Airport

"It seems feasible to find a reliable couple to occupy the living quarters... the wife could easily take care of the gas sales... Of course, it would be a great advantage if the husband were a licensed pilot and instructor." (Lew Norton in a letter to the HT 9/16/1951)

In 1963 the field at the Norton Sky Ranch was leased to the City of Healdsburg for \$1 per year. The City extended the landing strip to 2500 feet (from 2300 feet), made a paved 45-foot wide asphalt runway and built a row of 10 hangars for lease. The Norton Sky Ranch became the Healdsburg Municipal Airport.

When Paul Rued sold his ranch in the Alexander Valley in the early 1960s he became the manager of the airport, and his wife, Phyllis, became the bookkeeper and took care of gas sales. Phyllis was also in charge of the "fly-ins", which were a combination air show, family picnic and flying contests.

Today the Healdsburg Airport, located at 1580 Lytton Springs Road is a small general aviation airport. It is not staffed, but offers fuel by self-service credit card. ♦

Sources

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It was quite a while after his parents died out there that he came back out here. They came out to this property. It was 260 acres purchased from the McPhersons-Charles McPherson.

In the 1860s, there were three Young brothers in this part of Alexander Valley-George, Peter and Michael. Michael and George built a beautiful home right on Red Winery Road. They called it Oak Grove Farm. That's where we got the name for Oak Grove Vineyards [which the Young "children" established on the former Wasson property in 1975.]

If you look back in that *Sonoma County Atlas* for 1877, in the very back there, it shows a reference for Michael Young, who came to El Dorado County in 1851. He was mining.

Actually, I went into your Museum and went back to the old newspapers, and found all of the references I could about Michael. It seems like he was always involved in mining. He had a lot of claims. He bought up Pine Flat. At the time of that Atlas, it showed he had, like 700 acres.

Robert Young:

No [my grandpa wasn't mining quicksilver at Pine Flat]. We were farmers. When I was growing up, we were growing prunes on this ranch. Wheat was before my time. My grandpa, Peter, used to have cattle. He grew wheat and hay. That big barn stored straw and had stalls for horses. Every night the horses used to plow.

We had prunes: some Imperial, some Sugar, and more of the French. My sister Marion [Penry]

and I used to pick. I was a good picker! They paid by the box. Maybe five or ten [cents]. We used to pick Imperials-the big ones. Once I picked seven dollars. I used it to buy a bike, a Hawthorne bike.

We used to ride our bikes to the Guilford School. We used to come home after school was out and we'd go out there by where Judson Miller's house is, on the creek. We would catch trout. How we did it, we'd take a sack and a willow stick and put it in around the mouth of the sack. Then we would put some rocks in the sack to hold it down. Then we'd get a stick and . . .

Susan Sheehy:

Scare the fish into the sack? [everyone laughs] Dad, I think that's illegal!

Robert Young:

Not then! I hunted deer too. I had a real good friend whose name was Dick Foote; his dad was George Foote. He had a big ranch up there. We used to hunt all over it.

Susan Sheehy:

There was a toll road up there to the Geysers. That's where he's saying, up in the hills, the Foote ranch. The road now that goes up to the Jackson home, and you keep going up. I understand from Dad there was a road up there that went to the Geysers.

Robert Young:

Yes. I went to Guilford School here in Alexander Valley. We used to take our lunch in a lunch pail. I went to the first grade in town where St. John's School is now. We had to milk the cows. We had horses, calves, and later on, sheep, pigs and chickens to take care of.

Kelly Sheehy:

Weren't you telling me, Grandpa, you would go on Sunday and stay with Aunt Rachel and she would bring you back on Friday?

Robert Young:

No. Mom took me in on Sunday night and she would pick me up and take me home Friday afternoon. I don't know why I didn't go to school here. Better education? I don't know. I was in the same class as Garry Rosenberg and Addie Marie Meyer. I have a picture from first grade and we are all in the picture.

Susan Sheehy:

Your grandpa had died by then, and your grandma was on her own taking care of you, living in town on Tucker. It was a short walk to school, wasn't it?

Robert Young:

Yes. And I used to go sometimes with my grandma to the church. . . where the Christian Bible Church is.

After my dad died, we lost the farm. That was in 1936. My dad had a half-sister who was named Flora. Her husband was Tom Meek [of Soda Rock Winery]. He built that big house there too [now owned by Ken Wilson]. They owned a big 2,000-acre ranch at Spanish Flat, where Lake Berryessa is now. He also had two hotels in San Francisco.

Susan Sheehy:

[Tom Meek] was an entrepreneur and had no children. So when Dad's father died and the ranch was mortgaged to the bank for \$75,000, Uncle Tom was able to ask Dad if he wanted to come and

work his ranch where Berryessa is now or stay on this ranch. And Dad said. . .

Robert Young:

I wanted to stay! [Tom] did not put up any money. He went into the bank in town here and went to talk to Roy Haley who said he could buy the note for \$30,000. He did buy it and he did not have to put up any money. He had a lot of collateral and he had a good name. He said he was going to turn it over to my mother and me to take it over. And we did. We took 10 years to pay off the note. We are so lucky, and he was a good man. He helped a lot of people.

This ranch has three sections. [My father's brother] Maynard was separated from my Aunt Blanche and he had a ranch. That portion of the ranch got bought by the Squibbs. That was one-third. And this other one-third Warner inherited, and Uncle Warner didn't have any children either. Aunt Lorena, Uncle Warner's wife died in '65 or so, and then my Uncle Warner leased his property to us. We ran it until he died and he left it to Gertie and me.

Susan Sheehy:

The first grapes on the ranch were planted on fourteen acres right in back here in 1963. And I graduated in 1965, so when I was in high school, this was all still in prunes. Those grapes that were planted were planted on the advice of Bob Sisson, the farm advisor. It was a pasture in back, so Dad planted that to Cabernet Sauvignon in 1963. Those were the first Cabernet Sauvignon, the first varietal. And that is what encouraged him to plant more.

Continued page 12

Continued from page 11

Robert Young:

They were put on a trellis. The first trellised vineyard. People said I was nuts, because they only head-pruned the vines and these were on wire. But when the first crop came in, I got two tons to the acre! I sold to many different wineries: Pedroncelli, Simi, Rod Strong. I got four hundred dollars a ton for the Cabernet, and then in two or three years it was up to \$800 per ton. I sold to Windsor Vineyards, Belvedere, Sebastiani. . .

I decided to plant more. I went up the hill and planted six more acres [to Cabernet]. In '67 I planted Chardonnay. At first it was the R & G Young - for Robert and Gertrude-Vineyard. It was R & G Young up to '72, when we became Robert Young Vineyards, Inc. We weren't incorporated before that. The last of the prunes were pulled out in 1978.

I was chairman of the California Association of Winegrape Growers, CAWG [a statewide association of over 600 members] in 1982 and 1984. I went to Washington, D.C. many times. I have been on the Healdsburg High School Board and the Alexander Valley School Board.

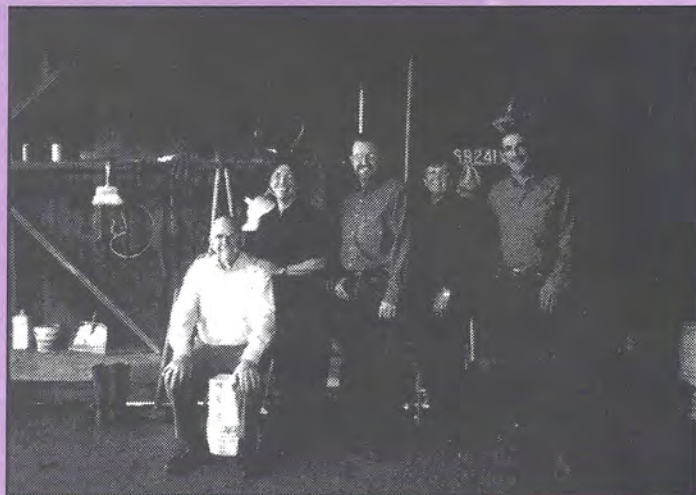
Susan Sheehy:

And Dad was with the Community Hall here in the [Alexander] Valley. He and Russ Green were co-chairmen for the reconstruction of the Hall. It's a beautiful building! Everyone from all over the Valley contributed. They raised over \$500,000.

Robert Young:

It was good to help a little. People have helped me, so I try. . . I have been lucky. I know I have been lucky [to have my children and grandchildren here with me].

We're just caretakers of the land. You can't take it with you.



*Robert A. Young with his children,
Susan Sheehy, Jim Young, JoAnn Young, Fred Young.*

[The above article is excerpted from a two and a half hour interview at the Robert Young home on Red Winery Road in February 2002. Robert Young is the recipient of the Healdsburg Museum's 2002 History Lives Pioneer Award.

For more about the Robert Young family and grape growing history,

see Carole Hicke's 1998 oral history interview with Robert Young, Jim Young, Susan Sheehy, Marion Penry and Donna Young, published by the Alexander Valley Winegrowers. Over 100 pages long, it is in the collection of the Sonoma County Wine Library, located at the Healdsburg Branch of the Sonoma County Regional Library System.]