

Bissett Memoirs

Memories of Fresno Flats from one of the Mountain Area's oldest families

Editor's Note: These are the memoirs Ralph Bissett has of his parents, Elick and Emma Bissett. Although the town's name was changed from Fresno Flats to Oakhurst long before Ralph was born, his parents were some of the area's early homesteaders. Ralph, 86, and his wife Betty, 79, still live near the his parent's original homestead on Bissett Station Road and Ralph has spent many years compiling the history of his family and the Mountain Area.

My father, Elick Omer Bissett, was born in 1870 in Virgil City, MO. In 1886, he rode the rails west to Madera County. He worked at the lumber mills in the summers — the California Mill No. 2, Soquel Mill and Sugar Pine Mill. He did everything from swamper to faller to logging train conductor and spent winters working on ranches in the San Joaquin Valley.

In 1895 he returned to Oklahoma where he and my mother, Emma May Polson, became acquainted.

In 1903, dad returned to California and resumed working at Sugar Pine Lumber Co., hauling freight from Madera to Sugar Pine. Wheels for some of the lumber wagons were solid wood — made from tree rounds that were bound with an iron rim. At the time, Madera had wooden sidewalks and dirt streets. While driving into the hills, sometimes the lead mule would be out of sight but dad didn't have to guide them because they would stay on the road all on their own. The lead mules wore bells so that anyone coming would hear them and get out of the way.

My mother, Emma, was born in 1881 in Chautauqua County, Kan. She was the second oldest child of nine, but the oldest daughter. She grew up in Kansas and Oklahoma where her father farmed. She worked in a millinery shop, designing ladies hats before coming to Orsi with the Kiggins family in the early 1900s.

Married in Stockton

Dad sometimes worked in Visalia with a woodcutting crew in the winter, so mom and dad soon renewed their romance and decided to marry. They took the train to San Francisco, then a riverboat on the Sacramento River to Stockton. They were married there Oct. 8, 1906, then took the train back to Raymond,

and finally a buggy to Fresno Flats.

They lived first in a house on the MacLeod Ranch, which was located on what is now School Road near Oakhurst Elementary School and Fresno Flats Historical Park. Their second home was the Femmons house near what is now the Yosemite Lumber Company on Crane Valley Road (426).

In 1908, mom and dad each homesteaded 160 acres, five miles up the Wawona Sugar Pine Road from Fresno Flats. They went on as "squatters" and, according to my sister-in-

law Elizabeth Bissett, dad was the first one in the area to homestead on Sierra National Forest land. She claimed he was well known and liked by the Forest Service personnel at the North Fork headquarters, so he was never evicted — It was easier to move the Forest Service boundary. The ranch grew to be about 1,500 acres.

Dad builds first house

Dad first built the house as a one story cabin and later enlarged it and added a second story. We got our water supply from a spring about a half mile up the road. First it was piped down to a cistern, and we would pump water out of the cistern — later it was piped into the kitchen.

Occasionally we had to fish mice, frogs or squirrels out of the spring and cistern. Dad built horse barns across the road from the house and also a blacksmith shop behind the barn. He had learned the blacksmith trade working for Charlie Meyers in his shop in Fresno Flats. Dad dry farmed grain and planted apple trees on the ranch. They also had a few head of cattle.

The Bissett Ranch was the first stop from Fresno Flats for the Sugar Pine freight teams and the Bigelow Stage. Jim Weakly from Raymond had a matched team of 12 gray mules that were the envy of other teams. The heavy machinery and materials used at Sugar Pine were hauled by Weakley and others.

Mom operated a store and

lunch room at this location and she would listen for the sound of the wagons coming up the road. When she heard the wagon bells she would put food on the stove and have a meal ready by the time the teams were stabled. My folks operated the freight stop about 10 years until motorized vehicles became the mode of transportation.

Building a road

Around 1912, dad had a contract or agreement with either the Forest Service or the county to build a road from the Sugar Pine Road at the homestead to Castor Ranch (later called Batterson Ranch, now Sky Ranch). He picked out a route, took a team and a plow and started plowing.

After he got it wide enough, he used a Fresno scraper to finish the job. It is now county Road 620 or Bissett Station Road, still basically on the same alignment.

The first Manzanita School, or Old Manzanita School, was built in 1915 on the Bissett Ranch about one half mile north of the homestead house. The families of McPheeters, Manning, Meally and Bissett furnished the labor and the Sugar Pines Lumber Mill donated the lumber. The school operated until Highway 41 was completed and the New Manzanita School was built near Big Cedar Springs.

Around 1921, my parents rented out the store property and moved about a mile up the Yosemite Road to Burford Station, which was the ranger station at the time.

Dad worked fire control in the summer. When a fire was spotted in the area, he would saddle his horse, pack his mule and head out alone, looking for the fire. When he found it, he would start attacking the fire. In

GERTRUDE SCHOOL

Gertrude School days remembered

By "BOBBY" NORBERG MILES

Special to Sierra Star

Gertrude School — Ahwahnee, the sign read. I pressed the brake. The car slowed to a stop and all was still.

Like a photograph from another era, the old building captured my attention. Frozen in time, it stood silent and proud. With memories tucked inside, my shy, first days of school came back to life. This was my grammar school where I attended first grade in 1948. I was 5 years old.

I glanced at my hands resting on the steering wheel. They too looked much like this building ... aged with years, proving that time leaves its mark even though our lives want not to notice.

I cleared my throat, sank deeper into my seat, and wondered what happened to all those kids who made their way through the eight grades of this little school. And names from another time were reborn to my thoughts.

Molly, pretty and blond, had been the object of my admiration. There was Lorena, the cute, spunky brunette whose wittiness leaned toward the unexpected. And I thought of Christine who rode her horse to school each day, making recess more fun by giving us crisp red apples to feed her pony.

Evangeline, with her little Dutch-boy haircut, a girl named Olybelle who could yodel, and a soft spoken Indian boy named Truman, were my good friends.

I remembered Charles, the doctor's son, who was lucky enough to ride to school in his dad's crazy old car they had named The Green Gopher.

Then to my mind came David, my "big kid" who used to watch out for me as I peddled my two-wheeler down Highway 49 and onto the old Grub Gulch Road (now Road 600) toward my school.

And the memory of a boy named Lyie made me smile. In Raley's not long ago we had laughed and hugged as if 60+ years had not passed between then and now.

I opened the car door and stood on the school grounds. Games like Anti-Anti-Over and Last-Couple-Out played in my mind. Alone, I looked to the big oak tree and voices from the past flooded my memory. There in its shade we had played house under the branches of the old tree.

Standing quietly, I remembered too, how I loved the snows of winter but hated wearing the ugly, wool snowsuit my mother had ordered from the Sears catalog.

Breathing the fresh air of fall I remembered a day we got out of school early because the big kids had sneaked the wall clock from its place and moved the hands 30 minutes forward.

With a sigh, I sat down on the steps. They were different - facing to the side. In my memory they had faced toward the road, straight out from the front of the building. My hand touched their rough edges and the memory of the clanging old school-bell filled my mind.

This one-room school, complete with 20-some students, hosted an outhouse at the back of the grounds. With a smile I remembered on Halloween nights anonymous gremlins lurked the night awaiting their chance to upset the famed "one-holer." With never a miss, next school day would find the outhouse lying on its side as if to test the patience of our teacher.

Mrs. Ruby Worman was her name. Stem but friendly, she was my first teacher. With graying hair pulled into a bun, her face would glow as she read us stories. Her eyes would sparkle as she spoke in her musical tone. And in my mind, I saw the old wooden desk where I sat at the front of the class.

I felt glad the Gertrude School was still there. Inside the walls of that once thriving little school-house lived a part of me — a part of my life I looked back on fondly. My visit had quickened my thoughts of all those who were my classmates in the late 40s and early 50s. If I had one wish, it would be for each to know how important they were in my life.



LEFT: The old Bissett homestead around 1907, which was located in the area of Oakhurst Elementary School and Fresno Flats Historical Park off School Road.

BELOW: The Bissett family enjoying a picnic. From left, Hazel, Lester, Ruth, Ralph and Elick.

BISSETT COLLECTION/
SPECIAL TO SIERRA STAR



Elick Bissett



Emma Bissett



the winter months, he did road and telephone line maintenance for the Forest Service. Mom was telephone operator and dispatcher. She wasn't a very big person, just under 5-feet.

In 1934, when Highway 41 was completed, the Old Yosemite Road was abandoned and the Bissett Ranch Store ceased operations. We knew we had to move over on the new highway if we were to continue having a store. It was at this time that mom and dad started building Yosemite Forks, which was a gas station and lunch counter.

More stories...

Here a few more stories told to Ralph by his father Elick:

★In 1906, dad said he had the opportunity to buy the Nichols Meadow — where the Raley's Shopping Center is now located — for \$500. He made the mistake of telling his friends what he was about to do and someone overheard him and beat him to it, buying the property out from under him.

★Camp Hoyle was located where the Wawona Campground is now. Dad lived there in a cabin for three summers while doing road maintenance. One fall he got snowed-in by three feet of snow and was forced to walk out on snowshoes to Bissett Station 15 miles away. It took him all night.

★Dad was a great mule skinner, but never much of an automobile driver. He once went to Madera to get his license renewed. During his driving test he came to a stop sign but did not stop. When the examiner called him on it, dad said "since there weren't any cars coming ... I didn't see any need to stop."

★While Dad was living and working at Sugar Pine, he had a cabin mate that came in late one night full of booze. He made several comments to dad, who was in bed, but dad ignored him. The man said, "I'll show you," pulled out his pistol and fired a couple shots in the wall over dad's head. Dad continued to ignore him, so the fellow grumbled around and finally went to bed. All this time, dad was awake but pretended to be asleep. He waited until he could hear the man breathing hard and knew he was asleep. Dad then pulled out his pistol and fired a couple shots right in the bed post over his cabin mate's head. The man came out of bed, boiling mad, shouting, "You could have killed somebody!" Dad said, "You should have thought about that earlier." Dad never started a fight but he also never backed away from one and his reputation was pretty well known.



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School children at Gertrude School, approximately 1936-37. From left, Geraldine Graham, Gertrude Espe, Florence Perry, Bobby Jean O'Neal, Darien "Bunky" Mecchi and George "Junior" Dewey Perry.

Back in my car I took one last look, turned the key and the engine sprang to life.

Holding that little school like glue to my mind, I told myself, "Life goes on, but it becomes much richer to look on the past with fondness in the heart." Smiling, I knew I had done just that.

Author's Note: Gertrude School started in the boom mining town of Gertrude on the Fresno River. Named for the mine owner's wife the school flourished until the town vanished near the turn of the century. The name was retained at a school in a new location on Crooks Ranch. In 1913 a new Gertrude School was built at the present location at a cost of \$800 on land donated by Mr. Crooks. Remodeled in 1937, it was considered one of the most modern schools in the mountain region. It is one of the few remaining one-room school buildings in the area. Closed in the late 1960s, it is now used by the Yosemite Western Artists Association.