

April 20, 1983
Annie R. Mitchell History Room
Tulare County Free Library

For 81 years travelers along the route that is now State Highway 198 have enjoyed the sight of a beautiful Victorian-style home. The stately house, the grounds and the outbuildings have been immaculately maintained, reflecting pride of ownership, first Lorenzo Hilliard, the man who built it, and later of his daughter, Effie Hilliard Strobridge. But April 10 the beautiful old home was destroyed by fire.

Fire officials said Mrs. Strobridge was warming a robe next to a range when the robe caught fire. She extinguished the fire in a sink and put the garment on a cushion, but soon saw the cushion smouldering. She took the cushion outside to extinguish the fire with a garden hose. Thinking the fire was out she placed the cushion on the back porch to dry.

Later Mrs. Strobridge observed that the side of the house was ablaze and attempted to put it out with the garden hose.

About that time a passing motorist, Bill Mehrten of rural Exeter, saw the fire and stopped to escort the 92-year-old Mrs. Strobridge to safety. Realizing the fire was too far gone for him to put it out, he waited for firefighters who were on their way.

The material in the lovely old home, dried from eight decades of San Joaquin valley summers, had roared into uncontrollable flames. The damage was total. Estimated loss was \$200,000 to the house and \$100,000 to the contents, many of which were antique.

Savings of \$75,000 was estimated for nearby outbuildings, a 1929 Cadillac automobile in perfect condition, and miscellaneous items.

Mrs. Strobridge's home north of Farmersville was built in 1902. Professor J.M. Guinn, A.M., in his book "History of the State of California and Biographical Record of the San Joaquin Valley" published in 1905, describes the house as a "nine-room, two-story residence conceded to be one of the finest farmhouses in the vicinity, with other improvements in keeping."

The redwood for the home was hauled from Atwell's Mill located on the road to Mineral King. The wagon in which the lumber was hauled is now in the Mooney Grove museum. The cost of the home was around \$1300.

Lorenzo Hilliard was one of several children born to Mrs. Strobridge's pioneer grandparents. Abraham and Elizabeth Hilliard, who came from Pennsylvania across the plains with ox teams to

California in 1852 with one child. They settled in the vicinity of Stockton, then came to this area in April, 1853, settling in Woodsville, which had a population of 15.

In the fall of 1854 the Woodsville residents had to call for assistance from the soldiers at Fort Miller when Indians became troublesome. The soldiers attacked the Indian camp, killing one, and peace was restored.

An interesting sidelight to the Hilliard stay in Woodsville is that they lived in the Wood's cabin, famed in local history as the site of a massacre, in 1850, of 13 men, including John Wood. They were the first settlers of record of the county.

In July, 1852, when Tulare County was organized, Woodsville became the county seat and Wood's cabin was listed as the first courthouse of the county. The Hilliard family actually lived in the cabin when it was technically the Tulare county courthouse. In September 1853, the county courthouse was moved to Visalia, where it has since remained.

Abraham Hilliard was also a member of the first county grand jury which was called in June 1853 by Judge Thomas Baker.

The Hilliards purchased 500 acres for general farming on the Kaweah River over a period of time. Lorenzo, Mrs. Strobridge's father, was raised on the paternal farm and educated principally at the Deep Creek District School, where his daughter later attended before attending high school in Visalia prior to majoring in home economics in college.

About 1889, Lorenzo bought the property where he built the home which burned April 10. He engaged in farming and stock raising. His wife, the former Laura B. Teague, was born in the vicinity and was the daughter of John B. Teague of Exeter. Besides their daughter, Effie Elizabeth, they had one son, Carroll Arthur, now deceased.

Mrs. Strobridge, who has no children, has carried on the family farming tradition.