

Viewpoint
Strictly Personal

Effie Strobridge Was Fiercely Independent
By Joe Doctor

Wednesday, Jan. 29, 1986

Our first encounter with that remarkable personality, Effie Strobridge, was like 50 years ago when we went out to the home of Effie and her father, Renzi Hilliard at what was then known as Hilliard's Corner, across the road from Deep Creek school and beside what was then known as Mineral King Highway but is now Highway 198. Renzi had just turned 90-something and I went out to do a feature on his long life as a very early Tulare county native, having been born in 1857 just up the road north from Hilliard's Corner.

His folks had come to Woodsville, the original county seat, still farther north up the road and his dad, Abraham Hilliard, was a member of the first Tulare county grand jury in 1853.

Abe Hilliard and his wife lived for a time in the Woods cabin, prominent in Tulare county history as the first county courthouse when the county was formed in 1852. It was built by John Woods in 1850 when Woods brought a party of men to Woodsville to begin a ranching operation which ended in December of 1850 when Indians, after warning the whites to get off the property, which they believed to be part of the territory given them by treaty, descended on the cabin and wiped out the party except for two men and a teen-age boy.

At the time I interviewed Renzi Hilliard, he had all of his original teeth and I asked him if he had ever had dental attention. He told me that he and his brother, as teen-agers, had required dental attention, so they hitched up a team to their buggy and drove to Oakland. Renzi had four gold fillings which he kept until his death.

Renzi could remember the floods of 1862 and 1868, the latter which deposited redwood logs and other timber all the way to the valley floor. One could go all the way to Visalia without [...] father split enough cedar fence-posts from logs which washed down to fence a considerable acreage.

Renzi was a good farmer and a good businessman. When the automobile age arrived, he took care of his cars in the same careful manner he had taken care of his horses, his wagons, buggies and harness. We heard later that one of the reasons the old Cadillac that is now in the county museum and other cars were still around was that Renzi would go to town to trade for a new car and when given a price on his trade-in that he could not accept because it was in such good condition, he would refuse to trade but would buy the new machine while keeping the old one.

When I approached Effie, Renzi's daughter, to give "Dad's old wagon," as she called it, to the museum, she responded in her terse manner that the wagon was in good shape, she had horses and the harness and she "might need it again someday."

It was not until after the 1955 flood, when water rose about four feet in the barn and deposited silt around the wheels of the wagon, that she called up to ask if we still wanted "Dad's old wagon," and if so we better come out and get it before the wheels rotted off. My son and I went out and jacked up the wheels, cleared them of the silt, and rolled the wagon out of the barn. Good old Sid Schelling donated the use of an Exeter Mercantile truck and equipment trailer and we move the wagon to Mooney Grove. [a park in Visalia]

At that time the name of Bert Belknap was painted beneath the driver's seat. Bert, an expert teamster in his day, had hauled the redwood lumber from Atwell's Mill, located on the road to Mineral King. [...] Victorian two-story house which his daughter maintained in such prime condition until it was lost by fire a few years ago.

At that time, in the garage south of the house, was stored another of Renzi's Cadillacs, a 1928 sedan with plush upholstery and bud vases hanging on the rear compartment, in mint condition with low mileage.

While we were rummaging around the barn looking for blocks for our jack, we found an ancient zinc bathtub with hardwood rim and brass fittings still attached, filled with rolled oats, feed for her horses. I asked Effie if she would give the bathtub to the museum if I would find her a good tight barrel in which to keep the oats.

"Young man," she said in her abrupt manner, "I have given you enough for one day. I need that tub for the oats."

But it did not end there. Some years later she came to ask if she could get a copy of my book as a birthday gift for her neighbor, David Wortman. The Wortmans were about the only neighbor with whom she was speaking at the time. I told her I did not have a copy for sale, which was true, but she could buy one at the book store. When she learned the price, she decided not to buy, but a few minutes later she was back to make a deal. "Do you still want that old bathtub? If you get me a book you can have it."

I did not wait for her to change her mind. I went to the stationery store and bought a copy of the book, which I gave to her, got in my old pickup and drove to her ranch, where I loaded it. She had gotten rid of the horses and no longer needed it. You can see it, as well as an old washing machine, with her name as donor, at the museum.

Effie was a very frugal person and often difficult. But to those of us who knew her as a friend, and she had some despite her reputation of being outspoken and even at times cantankerous, it was all part of her personality that make her a very interesting, fun-to-know individual, and that she was. When they were building the freeway on Highway 198, there came a time when the state highway right-of-way men had to deal with Effie. When they were not amenable to what she wanted them to do, she told them to get off her property and stay off. They came to me and asked if I would intercede for them. No way, I told them. I was a friend and I wanted to stay that way. Her picket fence is still there just as she wanted it.

She was a good friend of Florence Doe and Sarah Smith of Visalia, and of the late Kitty Knight of Woodlake. She accompanied Florence on an ocean voyage to Japan and was an admirable traveling companion. But Florence learned that Effie considered tipping to be an intolerable rip-off and she would not stoop to it.

During the 1955 flood, Effie's farm was pretty well covered with water and she lost some hogs. The water almost came into her house. One of her neighbors with whom she did not always get along was the late Bryant Pennebaker. He had a high-wheeled 4-wheel drive truck which he used to help those in the flood area. Bryant told me when he went to Effie's house to offer help, he knocked on her door, not knowing what kind of a reception he would get. When she opened the door and saw him, she broke into tears and exclaimed she thought no one would come by to help her.

She was a fiercely independent person, and she let it be known. She could afford to drive Cadillacs, and she did. She wore her working clothes much of the time, but when she dressed up, she wore the best.

In a world that has more than its share of drab persons, she was unusual, and so far as I am concerned, she will be missed.

