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HUGH

THE BIOGRAPHY OF HUGH CODDING

BY JAMES DUNN



When Hugh Coddling was in high school, his main ambition in life was to land a date with Lorraine Cleveland, according to Hugh's sister Grace. Cleveland was queen of the Rose Parade in Santa Rosa.

In an effort to impress Queen Cleveland, Hugh bought a pack of cigarettes and determined to make himself suave. He coaxed his mother Ruby to teach him how to hold a cigarette. "He wanted to be sophisticated," Grace says. Hugh planned to invite Cleveland to the California Theater in Santa Rosa.

But despite his preparations, Coddling's shyness pinched off his ambitions. "He did not get up the nerve to invite her," Grace recalls.

After his father died when Coddling was still attending Santa Rosa High, his mother was left with few financial resources. Ruby Coddling moved her

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family into the home of her stepfather's brother—William Hood. It was a humble house, smaller than the one where the Coddings had lived in Piedmont. "I always got the odd room—the attic or basement," Coddling says. "I never took a kid to my house because I was so ashamed of where we lived."

When Grace found a job as a librarian, the extra income allowed the Coddings to

rent an apartment on Fourth Street. They called for a plumber to attach their stove. David Webster Hall responded, and connected the stove. The next day Hall returned and asked Ruby to a basketball game. The following night he brought a ham and stayed for dinner. Three months later he and Ruby eloped to Mexico.

After Ruby married Hall, Hugh lived with his stepfather and mother for about two years in a basement home at Leland and

Fourth Street. Hugh slept in the garage with Hall's son Frank. "Webb" Hall was a plumber, a hard drinker and a tough businessman. Hugh went to work for Hall & Sons Plumbing at \$3 per day, cleaning out sewers, installing septic tanks and fixing leaks.

"I did not like plumbing work," Hugh says, "but it was the only work available." He worked part time and did not have a

steady job until he got out of high school.

Discounting came naturally for Codding, even in his youth. His stepfather had had him help fix a leaking faucet where a pipe had frozen at a house of prostitution on Roberts Avenue in Santa Rosa. "I put on a new faucet," Codding recalls. The bill for the plumbing came to \$6. Hall did business by asking for payment immediately upon finishing a project.

"I went to the door to collect the bill and got seduced" by Dottie Roberts, the house madam, Hugh says. Roberts paired him up with one of her independent contractors. Hugh gave Roberts a \$2 discount on the bill in exchange for the opportunity to lose his virginity.

At first Codding claimed that the incident happened in 1934 when he was 17. Actually "it might have been 1935," Codding allows, "but I don't want to admit that I was that slow. I was 18 before I lost my cherry."

His first sexual encounter wasn't all that great, Codding remembers. "I was kind of disappointed."

These years were turbulent at home for Codding. Ruby disliked Hall's drinking, and the two would fight about it. "My mother got him straightened out," Hugh recalls.

One night Hall came home after having had a few drinks. Ruby walked into the kitchen, pulled out a big black skillet and then whirled around like a discus player about to let fly. She whacked an astonished Hall on the ear and knocked him out cold. "His ear turned black for three months," Hugh remembers. "That kinda slowed him up."

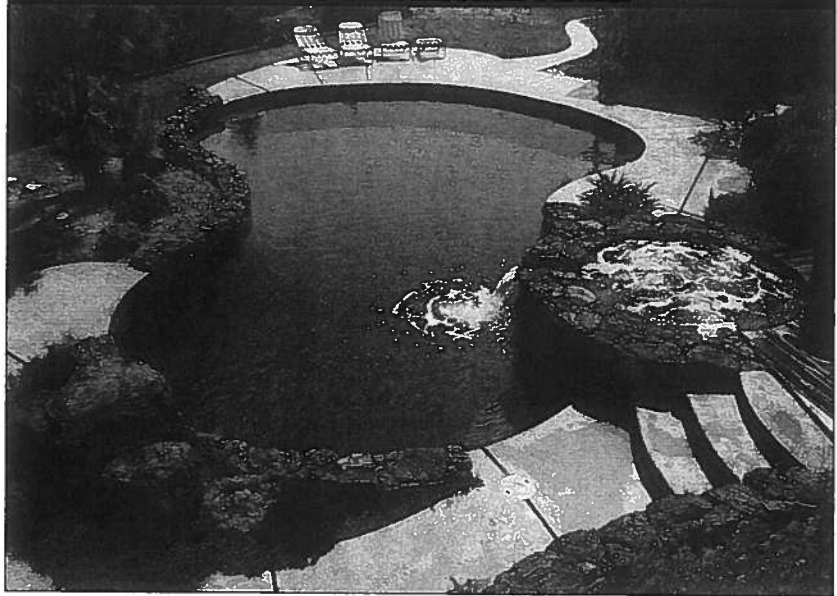
When Hall later complained that she might have killed him with the blow, Hugh recalls, she countered: "No jury in the world would declare me guilty of killing a drunk like you."

Codding was beginning to forge a life for himself away from home. When he was nearly 21, Hugh spent a summer as a park ranger in Russian Gulch state park, located nearly three miles north of the town of Mendocino. His job was to collect the 50-cent-per-night camping fee, cut and haul firewood, keep the bathrooms in running order, repair fences, and otherwise maintain the campground.

Codding fell in love with a high school girl named Bonnie from Santa Rosa whose family was staying at the campground. "Her mother got tired of me coming over," Hugh says. "Bonnie sang

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an Indian love call. She did a beautiful job." He asked her to marry him. It was her shapely physique that prompted the proposal, he admits, but the love calls didn't hurt. She said no.

By this time Codding had developed a rather direct mode of courtship: "Every girl I met I asked to marry me," he recalls. "It worked well for awhile until they started to accept. I was so obnoxious I did not have much to worry about."

His romantic advances rebuffed, Hugh turned to boyish adventure. While at the campground, he discovered a redwood tree nearly 200 feet tall with a rotted core where a hive of honey bees had made their home. Codding had heard that a clever way to collect bees' honey was to saturate burlap sacks with sulfur, light the sacks on fire and smoke the bees out of their hive. He reckoned he could then scoop the honey out of the tree crevice with impunity. "That's the way to rob a bee tree," he says.

Trouble is, the rotten heartwood was also tinder dry, and the smoldering sulfur ignited the tree. Within minutes the redwood tree had erupted in flames. "It was like a Roman candle," Codding says, leaning back and gazing upward.

The fire spread to other trees and soon had involved about two acres. Codding, alone on duty, grabbed the buckets he had intended to fill with honey and instead filled them with water from a nearby creek, frantically dousing flames and beating out embers.

Codding recently flew over the park and noticed that a bald spot still remains in the park where the fire scorched—a kind of monument to his fledgling apiary hobby that went up in flames.

The park service didn't rehire ranger Codding after that summer. "That was the end of my civil service career," he says.

The Russian Gulch caper wasn't

Codding's first skirmish with bees. Once when he was supposed to be plowing a field on a farm in Covelo, he paused to stuff a hollow oak tree's beehive full of sulphured rags and to smoke out the bees. Sparks flew out of the tree and ignited a nearby manure pile. The blaze went from there to a barn and destroyed it.

As his bee exploits cooled off, his romantic efforts warmed again. "I was a very slow kid (with girls)," Codding admits. "Practically the first girl I ever got serious with I knew for a week, and I asked her to marry me."

The girl was Dorothy Geisel, who had come from Oregon to Santa Rosa to attend beauty college. Geisel, who was 10 years older than Hugh, wound up renting a room in Pearl Brady's boarding house where Hugh moved after his stint as a ranger. He paid \$25 a month for room and board, and shared a bed with roommate Bob Lynch, now publisher of the Sonoma

Index-Tribune.

Pearl Brady called Hugh and told him there was a young lady who had moved in upstairs, but her bed had broken—a slat had fallen out. Hugh fixed the bed, then moved fast. "I put the mattress back," he says. "We went out for a beer. A week later we were married."

Codding nailed window frames together for Mead Clark Lumber at 75 cents per frame to scrape together enough money to buy an engagement and wedding ring—both for \$120.

Geisel and Codding were married in 1939 in Sparks, Nevada, with no guests in attendance. "We were just alone, the two of us," he recalls.

He had dropped by his sister Grace's home in Oakland to ask her advice on his bride-to-be. Grace discouraged the union, but he ignored her counsel.

When he announced to his mother that he had gotten married, she said, "You are the one who makes your bed, you are going to have to lie in it."

"She thought it was not the smartest thing in the world to do," he says. "I was a pretty headstrong kid."

Codding moved with his new wife into a duplex in Santa Rosa. By this time

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HUGH

Codding had begun to work with Hume Bunyan, Jr. as a carpenter's apprentice. At Bunyan & Bunyan Construction, Codding learned how to build houses.

Codding credits his stepfather Hall for giving him the initial nudge into contracting. "He suggested I go down and get a loan and build a home," Hugh says.

Around 1938 Codding went to Santa Rosa Savings & Loan and borrowed \$2,500 to buy a lot on Bush Street for \$500 and build a home. He bought \$800 worth of lumber from Mead Clark Lumber Co. Howard Wheeler, a teacher at Santa Rosa Junior High School, helped Codding draw his blueprint. During the day, Codding would work for Bunyan, but in the evenings and on weekends he'd work for himself.

Codding dug footings by hand and built forms for the foundation, then had cement delivered by a man who pulled gravel out of the Santa Rosa Creek and hauled it to the site with horses and a wagon. "Two horses could haul about two cubic yards to a load," Codding says. The whole foundation took about eight yards. Codding had a mixer but shoveled the concrete into the forms by hand.

It took him nine months to finish the project, and he sold his first house for \$2,950 to a man named Dorsey Wood. Codding made a few hundred dollars' profit. The experience fired him up, and he soon bought another lot on the same block of Bush Street and started anew.

He put up his third house on Vallejo Street, framing it and laying down the joists. Codding, long on enthusiasm, was still short on carpentry skills. After the framing was done, Codding suddenly remembered that he had forgotten to plumb the house, to make its walls vertical and square. "It was pretty plumb," he says now, chuckling. "Not perfect, but plumb enough. You make a mistake like that, and it scares you so bad you never do it again."

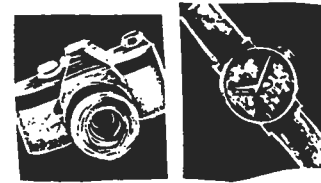
On another house in Santa Rosa Codding allowed the living room to get out of square; he forgot to check that the diagonals of the room were the same length—the best way to check squareness. When a carpenter came to put a



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hardwood floor in the living room, he had to cut the last few pieces in the shape of a "V," Coddling says. "It was three or four inches out of square. But after they put a rug down, they could not tell the difference."

To this day, Coddling has a habit of checking the squareness of door jambs and walls. "I am always looking to see if things are plumb," he says. The habit has become nearly unconscious.

The porch post on a Humbolt Street house that Coddling built isn't quite vertical. Every time he drives by, he looks at it. "That post is out of plumb," he says. "It always bothers me a little bit."

His building career was taking off; he had nearly completed 42 houses, including a 24-home subdivision called the McKinley tract off South E Street in Santa Rosa. The McKinley homes were Coddling's first major development. He



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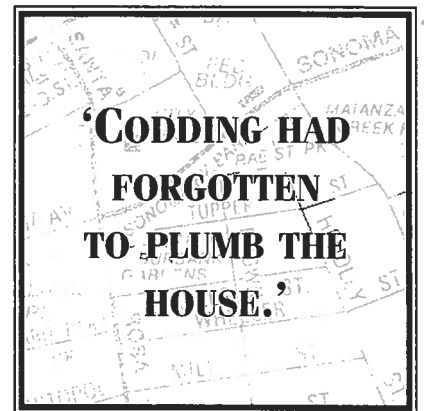
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paid \$150 per lot for the raw ground, then added improvements worth \$300 a lot: sewer, water, curbs and gutters, plus \$50 for surveying. Homes in the McKinley tract sold for \$3,750 to \$4,175 each.

Coddling filed a subdivision map with the City of Santa Rosa and forged ahead. The city had no planning department at the time. "The only time you got a building permit is if they caught you, and then it was \$1 a house," he says. In 1939 he paid \$5 for his contractor's license. "I became legal," Coddling says.

Coddling lived with his wife on Vallejo Street, just two blocks from the construction site. At the time, he had about 30 men working for him, earning

\$1 an hour. Some of them worked 10 hours a day, six days a week, agreeing not to receive overtime pay in defiance of union pay scales. "Nobody complained," Codding says. "They were glad to get the work."

His foreman was Jules Faoro, who still lives with his wife in Santa Rosa. Codding's work pattern was to drop by the construction site with a load of lumber in the morning, work for a couple of hours, then go prospect for other jobs. His wife Dorothy sometimes came to the construction sites, too, Faoro recalls.

Codding would leave his tools strewn around the site when he left. "It was up to us to pick up his tools and put them away for him," Faoro says. Codding was generous with tools, often loaning his own tools to new carpenters until he had none left.

World War II intervened before Codding could finish his McKinley project. Until the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, Hugh had been an isolationist and wanted nothing to do with the war. The raid changed his mind. "I folded the company and went into the Navy," Hugh says. He volunteered to join the U.S. naval construction battalion, known as

the Seabees. Faoro, who had children and did not go into the service, stayed to finish eight McKinley homes.

As he entered Navy basic training, Hugh, who is left-handed, was told he couldn't shoot a bolt-action rifle with his left hand. He grabbed a rifle and demonstrated the marksmanship he had learned on the ranch in Covelo: he fired four shots at a target 200 yards away, hitting all within a 10-inch radius. "I was the second-highest-scoring of 1,100 men in my battalion," Hugh says. □

Correction: Chapter 1 erroneously stated the father of Dick and Jim Codding. Their father is Bruce Codding, Hugh's older brother.

Next: Don't miss Chapter 3 of the Hugh Codding biography in the September issue of Sonoma Business where Hugh goes overseas with the Seabees during WWII. Then his contracting business explodes.

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