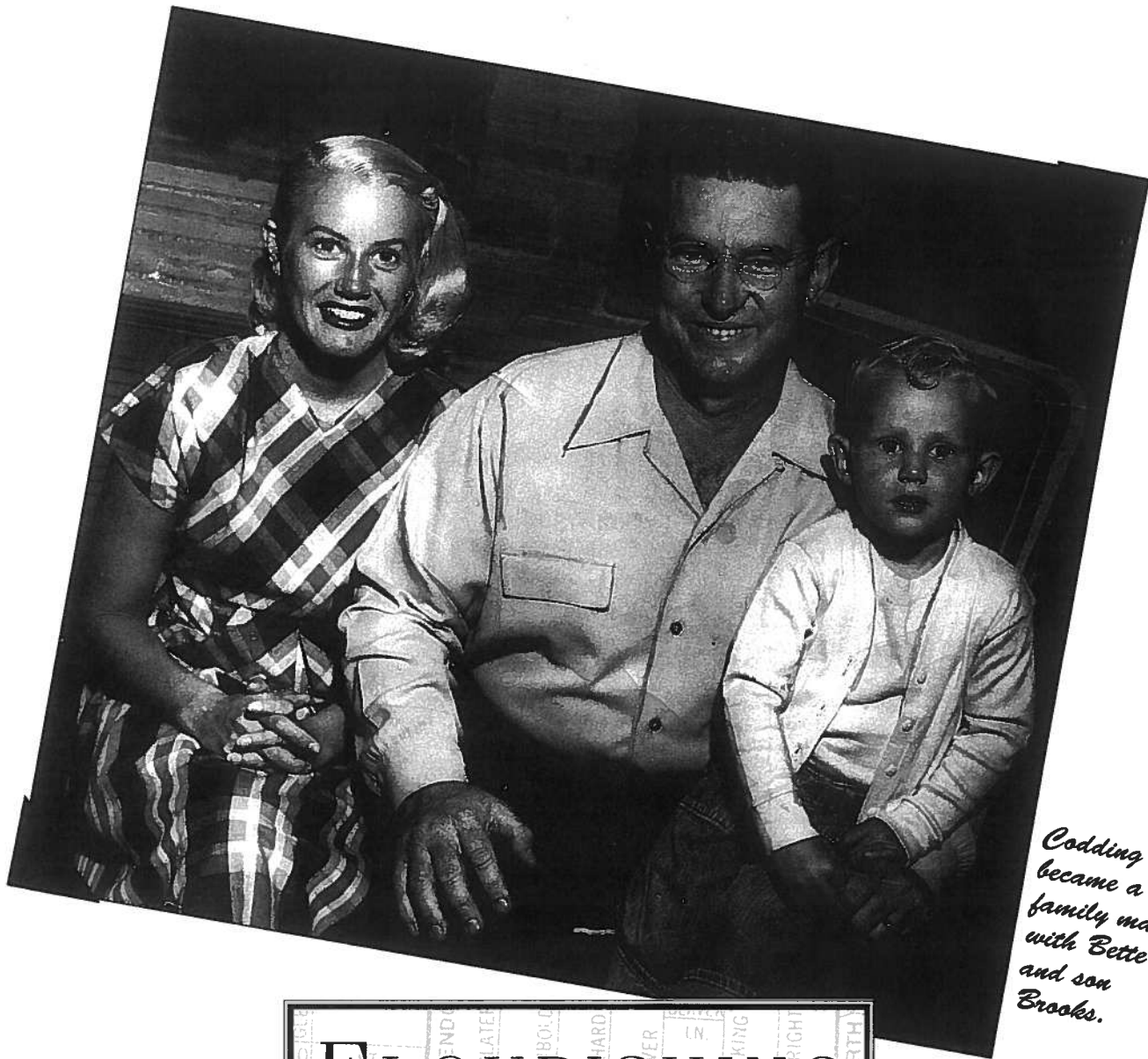


Codding's home building business blossoms.

HUGH

THE BIOGRAPHY OF HUGH CODDING

BY JAMES DUNN



Coddling became a family man, with Bette and son Brooks.

FLOURISHING BUSINESSMAN FINDS NEW WIFE

When Hugh Coddling was assigned to the 48th U.S. Naval Construction Battalion known as the Seabees in World War II, his ship stopped at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii. One evening the men were given liberty to go ashore, and Hugh walked alone to visit a brothel, where he encountered a long line of other sailors.

At the top of the stairs was a booth where a woman sold chits for \$5 apiece, Coddling recalls. There were three women attending to the Navy crowd; each woman had three rooms, to keep the clientele moving. "One guy was getting dressed, another getting undressed and one getting laid," Coddling says. "I walked into this room, and the gal was eating an apple. I could not get too

excited. She said, 'You'd better hurry up.' I told her not to embarrass me, and I gave her the chit and I left."

Seconds after he had headed down the street away from the house, two Marine police grabbed him and ordered him to go to a "prophylactic station" where he would be given a disinfectant called "blue ointment," used as a treatment for syphilis. Coddling protested. "I said I did not even get a hard-on," he recalls, but

the Marines made him go anyway.

After a 14-month stop on Maui, where his Seabees battalion built quarters for a Marine division, he went to the Marshall Islands and then to Guam.

"When we got to Guam, we laid offshore for four or five days. They were shelling the island before we landed. We would sit on the deck at night. These shells were red-hot. You would see them arc through the sky and explode on the shore," Coddling says. Guam was heavily defended, and close to 7,000 Japanese died in the invasion, in addition to nearly 4,000 U.S. casualties, he recalls.

His job was to build structures for military use. He worked as a carpenter's

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HUGH

assistant, usually with a crew of four men. He helped build hundreds of quonset huts and a 2,500-room fleet hospital in 21 days.

"It was filled overnight with Iwo Jima casualties," Codding says, breaking into tears. "It was kind of pitiful. There were so many casualties. The Marines were kids, 19 or 20 years old. They would bring in these guys all shot up." Codding was 27 at the time.

He recalls that about 7,000 soldiers died in fighting to take the island of Iwo Jima. "I think it was the bloodiest invasion of the whole war," he says. "They looked at the island as a way to save pilots' lives," so that sorties to Japan could be shorter.

Codding still recalls vividly one night he talked to a gunner who had been shot down and was in the water, listening to his crew mate hollering for help before he died. A Navy destroyer picked up the gunner and saved his life.

Some of the 12-inch-diameter sewage disposal pipes for the hospital were made out of redwood, with metal strapping around it, Codding says. Seeing the redwood for him was like a message from Santa Rosa, where he had commonly used redwood for construction because it was the cheapest lumber available. Also on Guam, Codding helped build underground storage tanks for gasoline, and buildings protected with concrete and dirt berms.

Though he had been trained for combat, Codding saw little direct action during his duty. "Guam was the only place where I could hear bullets flying. We did not have a lot of active shooting. We buried a lot of dead Japanese," Codding says.

Codding had one brush with combat. He was working on a water project with a man from San Francisco. "We went off looking for bananas in the Navy village," Hugh says. A couple of Japanese snipers concealed in the grass shot the man through both legs. "I was within 100 feet of him when he was hit. I ran over there. We found a canvas cot and used it as a stretcher." The snipers ran away, but American soldiers scoured the area and killed both, Codding recalls.

While Codding was on Guam in

HUGH

1944, he learned that his mother, Ruby Codding Hall, had launched into politics by running for the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors. "She lost," he says. "I think she was the first woman who ever ran."

Codding and his first wife Dorothy Geisel decided to get divorced while he was serving in the Seabees during the war. "We decided it was not working. I wrote her a 'Dear John' letter," Codding says. Geisel was 10 years older than Codding. He had been 21 when they got married. He never saw her after the war ended; she married a cattle buyer and moved to Washington.

After spending two and a half years



Bette Codding loved to dance.

overseas, Codding came to Santa Rosa on a 30-day leave in 1945. Unwilling to sit idle, he started building another house at South E Street and McKinley. The war ended about the time Codding was due to report for reassignment. He sold the house for \$6,000.

Codding worked at his construction sites until about 1946 when he hired a foreman. "I was almost beyond using a hammer," he says. But Codding tried to maintain an image of being one of the crew, ready to grab a shovel and jump into a foundation trench. He insisted that workmen call him Hugh.

Next Codding bought property on

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Sonoma Avenue and built the Brookside Terrace neighborhood—about 50 homes—along with the Brookside market. I could not wait to name a street after myself, Coddling says. Soon he did: Coddling Drive. “I think it’s the shortest street in Santa Rosa,” he says.

The first year after the war he built about 50 homes, then jumped production to nearly 200 houses a year. After the war, bathroom fixtures, sheetrock and hardwood flooring were scarce. A housing boom all over the country and readily available Veterans Administration loans had created a huge demand for these materials.

To keep construction costs down, Coddling hired numerous veterans even though the builders’ union complained about the practice. “Under the GI Bill I did not have to pay them a lot,” Hugh says. Their pay averaged 40 cents an hour, or 40 percent of journeyman carpenter wages. “All these young people getting out of the service, they needed jobs,” he says.


After the war, Coddling met Elizabeth “Bette” Ferenz, who worked as a stenographer for Sonoma Land Title company in Santa Rosa. In a high-speed-romance style that was becoming a Coddling trademark, the two were married a week after they met. Eleven months later, in 1946, they had the first of two sons—Hugh “Brooks” Jr. David was born eight years later.

The couple lived on Brookside Drive in Santa Rosa. As a joke, Bette called Hugh Jr. by the nickname Brookside. “It got shortened to Brooks,” Coddling says.

In 1947 Coddling formed his first corporation—Coddling Homes, with Charles Magowan as secretary and manager. His business began to flourish. “I had a tremendous amount of ego,” Coddling recalls. “I enjoyed getting paid. I wanted to make something out of myself. I wanted to see the day when I would be the biggest home builder in Santa Rosa. That was a goal.”

Starting his own business was not difficult, Coddling says. “You start so small, a one-man operation with one helper. You just grow into it.”

Also in about 1947, a man came to Coddling with a proposal that Coddling



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buy property near Klamath Falls, Oregon, where the site had underground hot springs that could be used for heating. Codding traveled there to look. The location seemed remote to him, not a stellar building spot. But he went to dinner at a night club on the California-Oregon border, called the Cal-Ore. "They had a musical trio there and a good-looking vocalist," Codding recalls. "I asked her to dance. She had a low-cut dress."

He bought five lots, with the idea of trying out the market and revisiting the

**'I ASKED
HER TO DANCE.
SHE HAD A
LOW-CUT
DRESS.'**

vocalist at the earliest opportunity. Codding sent a foreman to Oregon to start on the houses. A week later he returned himself. "I could not wait to get out to the Cal-Ore," he says. But alas, the trio had moved on to Reno. "I was stuck building a subdivision in Oregon," Codding says.

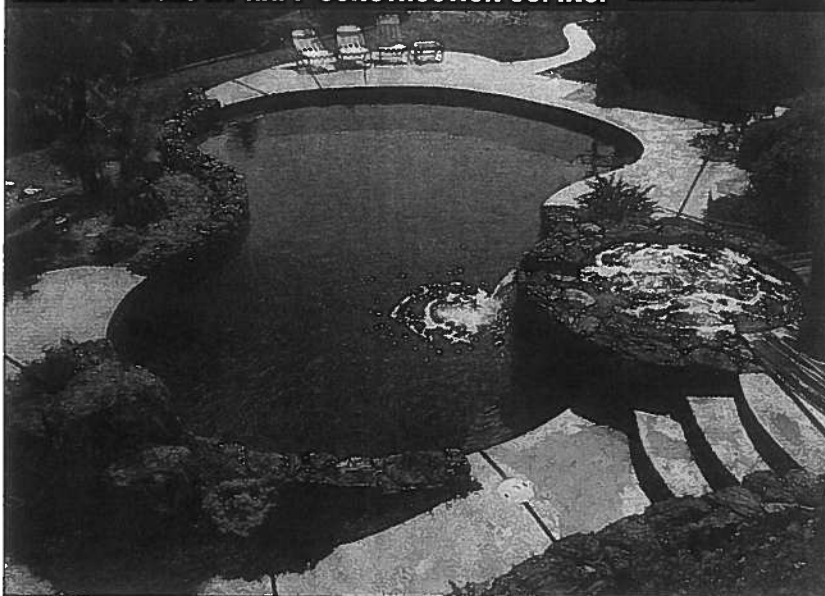
The next time he visited the site unannounced, and Codding found two feet of snow on the floors of the partially framed houses. The foreman was nowhere to be seen. After asking around the town, Codding discovered that his foreman had taken up residence in the town's brothel. Codding went to find him. Sure enough, "there is the Codding Homes pickup in front of the hook house," Hugh recalls.

Codding went to the local Swan Lake lumber company, thinking he could make a deal on lumber for the houses. "They wanted 20 percent more than I was paying in Santa Rosa," he says. He balked.

Instead, he had his own trucks haul

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redwood lumber from Santa Rosa. "That was the end of my out-of-state experience," he says.

While most of Codding's construction during these years was residential, building hundreds of small homes in Santa Rosa for \$11,000 with GI loans, he did small commercial jobs, such as remodeling the Burlington Bakery on Fourth Street, installing a maple floor to keep rats out. "A bakery is a bad place to have rats," Codding says. "They have a lot of good stuff to eat." He ran chicken wire over the floor and up the walls.

He also remodeled Ott's Stationery and gave the business a new storefront.

In about 1947 Codding bought more than 40 acres on Montecito Avenue, at \$1,100 an acre, and built his first shopping center, the Town and Country Shopping Center, on about two of those acres. The idea to build a shopping center had come from Codding's designer, Murray "Doc" Yates, who had seen one in Sacramento. Codding borrowed \$25,000 to build it. He estimates the construction cost for the entire center was \$70,000.

"Doc (given the nickname because he held a mortician's license) was a good businessman," Codding says. "The idea of a shopping center was new at that

point." Town and Country consisted of 12 stores, including a delicatessen, a bakery, a barber shop, a beauty parlor and a grocery store. Codding kept his own office in the center.

Before the center was completed, a representative of Mario Gracchi came along and asked Codding how much he wanted for the entire center. "The highest figure I could think of was \$100,000," Codding says. "He came back in five minutes with a check for \$5,000" as a down payment. "Then I thought, 'This is better than building houses.' That was more money than I had made in any year in my life. That's why I got into commercial building," Codding says.

Gracchi, living in Guerneville at the time, was a retired Seagrams liquor distributor, according to Codding.

Codding soon built nearly 150 homes nearby. "Hugh had big ideas," says Jules Faoro, his construction foreman then. "He came along at the right time when we needed a lot of houses. He got in on the ground floor in shopping centers."

According to Faoro, Codding would custom design houses informally with customers, often over a cup of coffee, drawing the plans on a napkin. "He'd bring the napkin on the job," Faoro says.

Codding lived with his son and wife Elizabeth on Elizabeth Way in Town and Country Village. Elizabeth had no interest in the business, Codding says. "She was a good mother," he says. "She liked dining out and dancing. And sports.

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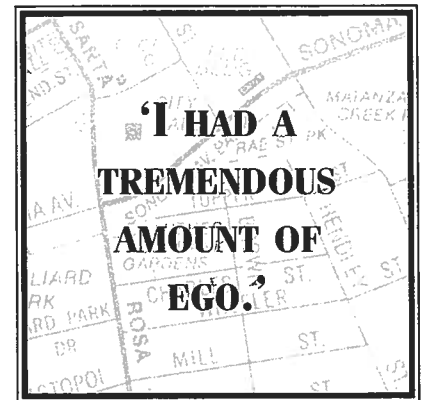
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She liked baseball and football."

Elizabeth was fond of high society, and was an excellent ballroom dancer. "I'm not anything extra" on the dance floor, Hugh admits. On their anniversaries, he'd take Elizabeth to the Fairmont Hotel. At a party the Coddings held at Los Robles, Elizabeth came dressed as Cleopatra.

Codding's business was beginning to

HUGH

explode. He bought another 55 acres and started Montgomery Village Shopping Center in 1949, opening it in 1950. Codding kept acquiring land and building more and more houses, totaling nearly 1,200 acres in all. "Whenever land was available, we would buy it," he says. Along the way he sold land for schools at cost. "We were trying to build a community," Hugh says.

The speed building experience he gained with the Seabees Codding turned to his advantage as self-promotion. "In the Seabees everything was done as quickly as possible," he recalls. "With a thousand men in a camp, you need the latrines as soon as possible." These days, with government bureaucracy, "it would take two years to get a permit," he says.

In 1950 he had his crew slap a house together in three hours and nine minutes as a publicity stunt.

Then on a Saturday in June 1952, Codding Homes built the Presbyterian Church of the Roses in Montgomery Village in five hours and 16 minutes.

By this time Codding had also started several ancillary companies: Codding Real Estate Co., with Edward Hinkle as vice-president and manager; Empire Wood Products, with Rudolph Groth as manager; Montgomery Village Development Co., managed by Paul Golis; and Codding, Magowan & Studdert Inc., an insurance company run by James Codding. Before long, the insurance company was one of the largest in the county, handling commercial insurance for construction companies, loggers and sawmills. □

Correction: After reading Chapter II, Hugh Codding recalled the name of the owner of the Santa Rosa brothel where he lost his virginity differently than he had earlier: her name actually was Dorothy Leonard, he says.

Next: Don't miss Chapter 4 of the Hugh Codding biography in the December issue of Sonoma Business, where Hugh goes hunting, builds Montgomery Village, dives into his third marriage with a woman named Nell, then promptly goes broke.

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