



*Undaunted by inexperience,
Hugh soars into aviation
and nearly crashes.*

HUGH

THE BIOGRAPHY OF HUGH CODDING

BY JAMES DUNN

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After he survives a few mishaps as a pilot, Codding's tour in politics takes flight.



James Stockman, a retired colonel who worked for Codding during the 1950s, taught him the rudiments of flying on a cloth-winged Cessna 170 that Codding had obtained through a trade for a house he built in Montgomery Village. The two puttered around Sonoma County airways and occasionally flew on jaunts to Modesto. One day they flew the plane to Santa Monica to meet with a partner on the Flamingo Hotel development project.

The men stopped at an airport in Salinas, and Stockman asked Codding to try a solo landing. Codding did fine, and the two proceeded to Santa Monica.

Codding, who was finalizing a divorce with his second wife in Reno, decided to fly alone to Las Vegas, then to Reno. He

AIRBORNE CODDING

planned to follow the highway out to Las Vegas. "I was lost in one hour. When I came out over Bakersfield, I knew I was going wrong. I was hollering over the radio, 'I'm a student pilot! This is May Day! This is May Day!' I turned around over the desert. It was getting dark."

Codding made radio contact with air traffic controllers at Daggett Air Force Base and spotted the smokestacks at the Victorville cement plant. The controller suggested that Codding use lights from the town's drive-in theater at Barstow,

aiming for a landing strip along a river bottom. There were no landing lights on the strip, only a row of old coffee cans.

"I went down," Codding says. "I almost knocked over the gasoline pumps. A guy walked up and said, 'That was kind of a hairy landing.' It was my second landing ever. This is not the way I would advise anybody to learn to fly."

The man talked Codding into spending the night, and he flew to Las Vegas the next day but not without getting lost a second time over the Sierra Nevadas.

On his honeymoon with Nell Codding, Hugh took the plane to Jackson Hole, Wyoming. He got lost in Nevada and was forced to spend a night in the

town of Elko. Then he flew on to Sun Valley, Idaho. "We flew over the valley, and there was an alfalfa field. We got down low. The sprinklers were going. We landed on a dirt road. They had an irrigated grass strip in 1956."

Eventually Codding was required to obtain his pilot's license. "The guy put me through maneuvers," he recalls. "He said I was a little rusty. I slipped him \$20. He gave me my license."

Codding, who has logged about 400 hours of flight since his introduction to aviation, had to sell his plane when he went broke, but gradually upgraded his planes through the years, eventually acquiring a small corporate jet. He once flew to Washington, D.C., but mostly flew on business or hunting trips.

Nell was unwilling to fly with Hugh. "Nobody would want to fly with me," he says. "I would go to sleep. I'd get bored. It's a bad habit when you are flying. I'm not cut out to be a pilot. I don't take the

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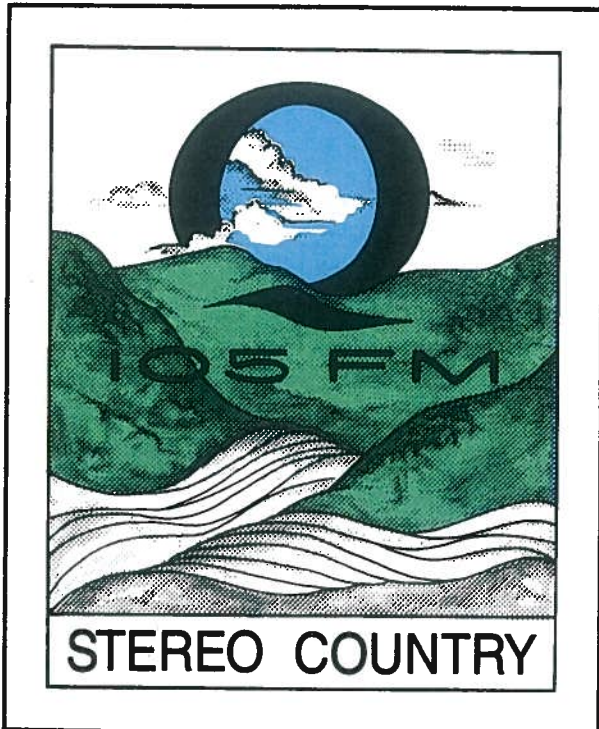
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HUGH

care. I would not check the gasoline. I would not bother.”

Once he jumped into his plane and jammed it into full throttle without untying the tail rope. Fortunately, it held. Had the rope snapped, Codding likely would have plowed into about 20 planes at the airport.

**‘PEOPLE DON’T
LIKE TO DRIVE
WITH ME.
I WAVE MY ARMS
AROUND.’**

Through the years, Codding frequently flew from Santa Rosa to his house at Sea Ranch—a 13-minute trip by plane, an hour and 45 minutes by car. Codding’s son David is an accomplished licensed pilot who now owns his own single-engine plane and regularly shuttles his wife Betsy to Los Angeles for modeling appointments.

The reluctance of others to accompany Hugh aloft extended to his ground travel. “People don’t like to drive with me,” he says. “I don’t pay attention. I wave my arms around,” pointing out scenic features or development prospects. Nell usually insisted on driving herself.

Though Hugh’s flying career never blossomed, his shopping centers did. From 1960 through 1975, he and Nell pushed to develop Coddington, while keeping Montgomery Village as a key asset. Nell became the overall manager of the two shopping centers, overseeing the site managers.

In 1964 Codding ran for city council of Santa Rosa and won by a slim margin. “I did not campaign,” he says. “I did not take a dime from anybody. I had a big advantage because I was so well-known.

The Press Democrat fought me all the way. Every day there was an editorial about the rich, powerful developer who wants to run the city.”

Codding served as a councilman until 1972, including a stint as mayor. The city’s planning director was George Smeath; the two frequently clashed because, according to Codding, Smeath tried to protect businesses at the center of Santa Rosa while Codding had interests in developing Coddington, which would draw business out of downtown. Codding and Charles DeMeo, another councilman, were pro-development but were often outvoted by the three anti-development council members.

Early in his political career Codding faced an indictment instigated by Smeath on charges of conflict of interest. It seems that Codding had voted on a matter involving improvements to Coffey Lane, where he owned a building. Also he was allowed more than four commercial lot splits on Cleveland Avenue without receiving approval for a subdivision, and more than four splits constitutes a subdivision.

“A few times I called him a jackass, and he always resented it,” Codding says of the planning director. “He would have loved to see me put in jail. I would have liked to see him sent to Russia. I irritated him. He had no regard for people’s property rights.” Codding says he was willing to put up \$10,000 for a send-the-planning-director-to-Russia fund if the city would match the grant.

Instead the council sent the charges to the grand jury, which dismissed them. “It was a lot of nothing,” Codding recalls.

During the 1960s, Coddington filled in with the Big 5 sporting goods store, a Roos Atkins, a Joseph Magnin and a Smith’s menswear store. Emporium paid \$75,000 for a 10-acre site. J.C. Penney and Liberty House (later Macy’s) also joined the center. “That made a whole center,” Codding says. “You call it a dumbbell center,” with giant retail stores anchoring both ends. “It just grew by topsy.”

Despite its growth, Coddington produced meager profits during the years when the center carried large amounts of undeveloped land. In the mid-1960s, the

northwest branch of the Sonoma County library was opened at Coddington. The library sits on one acre, purchased by the city for \$36,000. Codding claims the plot was really worth \$150,000 then and is now worth \$500,000. The only plots not owned by Codding are the library site and the Emporium site.

Near Coddington, the Coddings were also developing industrial property north to Hopper Avenue, along with apartments. Hugh developed lots off Coffey Lane and sold them to builders.

Montgomery Village was also thriving. The Lucky store was put on a lease that guaranteed rent payments of \$27,000 a year or 1.5 percent of gross sales. The store has had years of sales in the \$20 million range, producing rent income to Codding of about \$300,000. The Coddington Lucky store produces similar annual rent.

Most of the shopping center leases have a guaranteed minimum rent or a percentage of gross. For smaller retail shops the percentage is about 6 percent. A shop might guarantee rent of \$1,000 a month. If gross sales for a month are \$20,000, the rent, based on 6 percent, is \$1,200 that month. The lease arrangements allow Codding to benefit financially as his tenants grow.

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Codding developed the Lomita Heights neighborhood where he has lived for 33 years. His 4,000-square-foot home was one of the first built there. Many Codding Enterprises employees have lived nearby in the subdivision of 104 lots on 55 acres—one of Codding’s last

residential developments.

In about 1973 Codding developed the Merced Mall on 105 acres of land he purchased from a group of doctor investors. The doctors already had had a commitment from Sears to build a store at the mall. Sears bought 10 acres. Within a year Codding had developed 100,000 square feet of retail space.

Although he had business dealings all over town and extraordinary contacts, Codding disliked belonging to service clubs. He did belong to the Coddington Rotary Club for awhile. "The only time I go to clubs is if I give the talk," he says. "Clubs seem like a lot of small talk and a waste of time. They (Rotarians, for instance) go around fining everybody all the time."

At Nell's urging, Hugh's younger son David came to live with Hugh and Nell in about 1963. From the divorce until then, David had lived with his mother, Codding's second wife. Though David and Nell frequently had disagreements, Nell "was a good mother to him," Hugh recalls. "She helped him with homework."

When David was about 10, the Coddings kept a pet elephant for about six months.

A young woman had come to Codding's office selling knick-knacks, he recalls, including imitation elephant products. She showed him a brochure describing real baby elephants for sale: one at \$7,500; seven or more at \$4,500 apiece. The elephants were at Jungleland in southern California.

Hugh, who had his eye on the woman more than the elephants, asked to accompany her on a trip to pick out an elephant. He went next door to tell Nell about the trip. Nell promptly indicated she would go, too. "She outwitted me," he laments.

They went anyway, bought the elephant, named it Millicent and brought it home along with a hired trainer. The Coddings built a small elephant house on a lot near their own home. "David used to jump on it and ride around," he says. Once Codding led the elephant on a hike to Coddington as a publicity stunt. After they bought a trailer, the elephant became a regular mall shopper.

**'ROTARIANS GO
AROUND FINING
EVERYBODY
ALL THE TIME.'**

The elephant consumed huge quantities of dried milk and rice in a special formula, Codding recalls. "We would feed it bananas. It could eat 50 bananas at one sitting."

Later Codding learned from the police that he'd hired the trainer the day after

his release from a hospital for the criminally insane. Evidently the man had killed his previous employer, Codding says. "That's when I invented the golden parachute," he says, paying the man handsomely to haul the elephant back to Jungleland.

He had to pay Jungleland \$250 a month for room and board. The payments ran on for two years until Codding discovered that the Jungleland elephant keeper had sold the animal months earlier for \$2,500.

Codding claims he avoided paying sales taxes on the elephant by saying he was fattening it up as livestock. "The city attorney threw a fit. But I said it was one of my favorite foods." He guffaws. "It takes 21 years to mature." □

Don't miss Chapter VII of the Codding biography, where Hugh sets his sights on Rohnert Park.

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