

Fanfare not Foreclosure for the Common Man

I returned to the old apple farm town of Sebastopol for the first time in a long time. While walking its familiar streets, I aimed my camera at a tiny bungalow near the post office, a place that held special significance to my family. A gentleman moving slowly with his walker down the sidewalk saw me and announced "My grandfather lived in that house. Knowing many families had lived there over its hundred years, I asked "Who was your grandfather?" "James L. Case," was the reply. How could that be? James L. Case was MY grandfather and I had no idea who this man was. As we chatted, we figured out that he was the adult son of my grandfather's third wife, Laura. His story and the one I had heard through the years didn't quite line up, but the goodwill he expressed sweetened my memories. He had visited Grampa Case on his farm in the days when my mother was young, the farm that made history.

It is strange how much history can swirl around a single location. For instance the reason I was in town was to celebrate the centennial year of Analy Union High School, a school, I, my brother, my mother, my aunts and uncle attended between the years of 1914 and 1963. Auntie Helen had asked if I could locate Willard Libby's graduation address; he and she had shared valedictorian honors in 1926, long before the ranch was foreclosed and even longer before Willard was awarded the Nobel Prize in Chemistry for carbon dating. This search led to the one room museum located in the former train station on Main Street, Sebastopol, the station that brought kids included the Cases to high school from Forestville.

There was a time when this area and the farm of James L. Case, was important to more than members of my family. During the Great Depression, the eyes of the entire nation were fixed upon it. And the actions of one man, the preacher, and the farmer became a model for the plight of the common man.

The depression was slow coming to Sonoma County, but when it did, the foreclosure that hit the newspapers was of The Rev. James L. Case, former local Methodist minister and his home and apple orchard in Forestville. To purchase the ranch in 1911, the family had sold the Case property in Pacific Grove, incorporated as a city from a Methodist Christian seaside resort with my

great grandfather's help. Even today, if you walk along 19th Avenue near the beach and look carefully you'll spot the Case plaque on one of the tiny houses.

With the help of Gaye LeBaron, columnist for The Press Democrat and Sonoma County historian, this bit of family history has been put in context, particularly interesting today when headlines once again scream Foreclosures. For a time in July 1933 national attention focused on this one elderly farmer. The aim was to raise a ruckus, to quote Gaye, to raise the conscience of the legislature to this matter. She includes in the cast of characters, a socialist mayor, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, a parish priest, a crusading newspaper editor fighting for the little guy, the governor of California, a county judge, a Sebastopol banker with foreclosure at the top of his July list of things to do, and a former Methodist minister who had built a "showcase" fruit ranch in Forestville with 22 years of hard work.

The cherry crop that depression year didn't raise enough cash to pay the taxes and the interest on Grandpa's \$14000 loan. The bank called for a sale July 14, well before the bountiful apple crop was ready for harvest, setting in motion a protest across the nation. The Case ranch was chosen as a "test" confrontation between CA farmers and bankers. The outrage was far and wide. A two stage protest included a picnic on the Case ranch to "inspect" the orchards and to hear his story and those like him, and to show up at the Sonoma County courthouse 5 days later at the sale. If this model farmer couldn't make it, they were saying, how could other farmers? 3000 gathered to support the protestors and then cheered when at the last-minute Judge Comstock signed an injunction which halted the foreclosures for 3 months, long enough for the Jones Act, a mortgage moratorium to take effect. This small of stature former Methodist minister didn't get the Nobel Prize, but he spoke to the hearts of the disheartened farmers and to the world about their plight.

I didn't find that valedictorian address, but I have found the Case Ranch Bed and Breakfast in Forestville, walking distance from the Methodist Church where Grampa served and my grandmother's stain glass window memorializes her much too young death. The porch has chairs on it; Mom and Auntie Helen led us to their childhood bedrooms, and great grandchildren sat on the steps for 4 generation portraits. I could just imagine Grampa Case rocking on that

porch, and if we closed our eyes, we hear him as if back in the pulpit, making sure we too would work for the glory of God and the welfare of the common man.