

Editor's Note: The information in this oral history was gathered by late CHS members Dean and Candy Craig in five interviews of Minnie Hill Palmer's children - Edith Palmer Butler (b. 1910) and Leroy E. Palmer (b. 1912) and Minnie's niece, Ruth Manny Hill Rider. It was transcribed by Candy Craig and late CHS member Sheila Watts. Your Editor, Keith Watts, separated it into "chapters", added titles and other small editorial tasks. Published in four Smoke Signal Newsletters July to December 1999.

## **GROWING UP ON THE HOMESTEAD ACRE IN THE 1920's and 30's** (An oral history on what it was like living on the "ranch" in Chatsworth)

### (1) THE HOMESTEAD "RANCH"

In 1920 Minnie and Alfred Palmer and their two young children, Edith and Leroy, came home to California from Montana where they had lived and farmed for four or five years. (Minnie and Alfred had been married in 1909 and had previously lived in Los Angeles and Hawthorne, CA.) The family had only marginal success in Montana since too many crops had been lost to hailstorms and the price of grain had fallen precipitously after the end of World War I.

Living on the "ranch" at the time were Minnie's older brother, Lovell Hill, age 44, and their mother, Rhoda Enlow Hill, age 74. Mrs. Hill's youngest daughter, Calla Hill Hardacre, and her two young children, had been living temporarily with the family, helping to care for Mrs. Hill, who had been in poor health. Now it was Minnie's turn to care for her mother, who was a semi-invalid until her death only fifteen years later. (Minnie's father, James David Hill, had lived for some years with his older daughter, Rhoda Jane Smith, in Whittier, CA before his death in 1918 or 1919.)

The 1911 cottage, that replaced the original smaller house, was built by Lovell Hill and Willard Johnson and was currently occupied by Lovell and his mother. Edith and Leroy also slept in the cottage, but Minnie and Alfred slept in a separate one room building located southwest of the house. Later, this building became the bathhouse. Behind the cottage were a high-roofed, open-sided garage and a house-shed that held a bed. A large barn stood about 200 feet southeast of the house. There was also an outhouse, a chicken coop and one of the three dynamite sheds. (The small stone building near the entrance to Chatsworth Park South is the only dynamite shed that remains.) There was also a large redwood water tank mounted on a flatbed trailer in front of the house. It was refilled at a water tap on Devonshire St. and held water used for drinking and washing. Also near the front of the house was a cushioned, metal hammock hung between pomegranate trees. At the west of the house were tubs and clotheslines used for the family laundry.

The cottage, at this time, did not have the later, shed-roofed kitchen or bathroom and the front porch was not screened, but had translucent shades on the front and east side and opaque canvas shades on the west. Leroy said his uncle, Arthur Smith, built the enclosure.

### (2) FAMILY LIVING

At this time, Lovell Hill was no longer Postmaster in Chatsworth or associated with the Graves-

Hill store. The lower 120 acres of the property that had produced grain crops for many years lay fallow much of the time because the water table had dropped and "dry farming" was not productive.

The family's livelihood was now their dynamite and trucking business. They owned two Denby trucks, that besides dynamite, hauled granite (called "bluestone") from the stone quarry. Lovell, Alfred and later, Leroy, drove the trucks back and forth to San Leandro, San Diego and San Bernardino for construction projects and into Nevada to deliver dynamite for mining activities.

The animals kept on the ranch included goats, one bull, two heifers and a milk cow, four to eight horses, pigs, chickens, pigeons, dogs and cats. Edith told us about Towser, Lovell Hill's yellow terrier, who adored his master. Long before any of the family could hear the sound of Lovell's truck, Towser had disappeared, running "lickety-split" to meet the truck, far down the road and ride home with Lovell.

When we asked what their Uncle Lovell's personality was like, Leroy said he was outgoing and managed everything and Edith added that he was the best looking of all the family members. "He was handsomer than any of the women were pretty." Their father, Alfred Palmer, was described as quiet and easygoing.

Edith also remembered lots of wet winters when the ditch would overflow and, combined with the sheet flooding of the area, the water became so high that the house was threatened with high water. Edith said there were many times she took off her shoes and waded home from school.

The family grew all sorts of vegetables for their own use in the area west and south of the house. In the twenties they planted a large asparagus bed with plants obtained from a Chinese-American farmer who grew the asparagus commercially. The vegetables were irrigated with drainage water, from the train tunnel that flowed through a ditch to the property. It was a regular chore for the children to clean out the ditch to keep the water running. Unfortunately, the drainage water was not potable due to high levels of natural arsenic, so drinking water had to be obtained from the hydrant on Devonshire Street.

### (3) EVERYDAY LIFE

Everyone washed and bathed in the kitchen using a tin pan or tub until the bathhouse became available. Edith told of an incident of youthful fury that took place in the bathhouse in the mid-twenties. At the time, her cousin, Lillian, Aunt Calla's daughter, was living at the ranch and attending school. The two girls were about the same age and were expected to be friendly, but Edith resented Lillian because she was allowed to do her homework and studying after school, while Edith had to help her mother. Only after the dinner dishes were done was Edith allowed some free time. One evening after dinner Edith prepared for a nice bath by carrying many pails of hot water to the bathhouse tub, but she had forgotten something, so had to go back to the house to get it. When she came back, Lillian was in the tub. Edith was furious and yanked Lillian from the tub. The fight was ended when Minnie, hearing the yelling and screaming, separated the two girls.

The children did not have many toys, but there were always lots of things to do when they had

free time. Leroy hunted rabbits. Edith played the piano and took lessons from Mrs. Johnson that Minnie paid for, by crocheting. With no electricity or radio, the family made their own entertainment. They often played card games, cribbage and pinochle. Edith said, "We played lots of pinochle!"

In the early 1920's Edith and Leroy watched a motion picture company shooting scenes for a silent movie on a hill behind the house. The hill had been covered with piles of salt to simulate snow and a trapper or mountain man character was filmed hiking up and down the mountain. The piles of salt being used to look like snow were a source of great amusement.

Edith and Leroy remembered how much both their mother and father liked to knot, knit, embroider, crochet and piece quilts. A quilt frame was suspended by ropes from the living room ceiling and, by means of a pulley and rope, was let down to be worked on. Alfred Palmer knotted and crocheted two beautiful black handbags that Edith showed us. (Alfred Palmer was born in Minnesota and had a twin brother, Albert. Alfred Palmer died in 1946 at the age of 63.)

Furniture Edith remembered from her childhood included her Uncle Lovell's roll-top desk that held a black stick telephone. The telephone generator and ringer were mounted in an oak wooden box attached to the wall. The family owned a dark-finish, upright piano and the usual tables and side chairs. The living rooms had room sized dark-patterned carpets. (The lamp that currently hangs in the corner of the Museum may have hung in the house at one time. Minnie gave this lamp to Edith about 1952 and Edith gave it to the society in 1986.)

The adults in the family were not churchgoers, but Minnie felt Edith and Leroy should attend church to meet other children and be part of the community. Unfortunately, Edith, who was only ten or eleven, had only one good, yellow dress. The other children made remarks about her always wearing it. She was very unhappy and pleaded not to go to church, but was sent anyway. A short time later when Minnie, on meeting the minister in town, asked about Edith's progress and was asked in return, "Do you mean the girl who wears the yellow dress?", Edith was not forced to attend church any longer.

Ruth Manny Hill Rider, Minnie's niece, who often visited the house in the early 1930's, told us that the wide, square opening between the two living rooms was hung with portieres made of knotted, heavy brown thread trimmed with eucalyptus buttons (seed pods) and at the bottom, red glass beads. These macramé type curtains were about 20" wide, floor length and were tied back so that they formed a narrow drape.

The bedrooms contained "a bed, dresser and chair and not much else", said Edith. Linoleum rugs covered the bedroom floors and the kitchen had a "scrubbed wood" floor and a kerosene cooking stove. Kerosene lamps lighted the house and there was a kerosene heating stove in the west living room.

Ruth Rider said she had never eaten in the dining room because meals were taken on the porch when guests came, and the dining room, although it contained a table, was used as Lovell Hill's bedroom.

Mrs. Rider remembered the dark green exterior color of the house, but said that, from any distance, the house looked dark and unpainted. Only the color on the rear exterior of the house was still in good condition. (Paint scrapings of the house confirm this.) About 1958, Minnie had her grandson, Ronald Butler, paint the house butter yellow and he stated that the original color had been a very dark green.

#### (4) SOME FAMILY MEMBERS

Rhoda Jane Hill, the family matriarch, was still living in 1933 and, although very frail and often bedridden, was still a force to be reckoned with. Ruth Rider told us that Grandmother Hill would tap on her bedroom floor with her cane to call for attention and that she still indulged in chewing tobacco. She loved showing a collection of brightly colored paper stars that she stored in a box under bed. These were saved from the tobacco packages.

In 1929, nineteen-year-old Edith eloped with Laurence Butler. They subsequently had two children, Valerie and Ronald. In 1935 Minnie's mother, Rhoda Jane Enlow Hill, who with her husband James David Hill Sr., had homesteaded the original sixty acres, died at the age of eighty-eight and a half. Very shortly after, her son, Lovell Hill, married for the first time. He was fifty-nine years old. He and his wife, Laura, moved to a house on Hagar St. in San Fernando. (Lovell Hill died in 1952 and, on his death, Minnie inherited a large part of the two-hundred-and-thirty-acre property in Chatsworth. His wife, Laura, also inherited part of the acreage.) Leroy Palmer married Ann Margaret Swenson in 1937. They had no children.

The 1920's began the Rural American Depression and most farm families did not participate in the prosperous times of the twenties. By the time of the stock market crash in 1929, the farm depression had lasted for nine years and was to worsen during the 1930's. Only the farm assistance programs and the beginning of World War II produced better times, but by then the population of American farm families had been cut in half.

#### (5) BITS AND PIECES OF INFORMATION AND REMEMBRANCES

Following is the last in the series of a recording of the interview. The five interviews we conducted in 1986/87 with Edith Palmer Butler (EPB), Leroy E Palmer (LEP) and Ruth Manny Hill Rider (RMHR) contained the following bits and pieces of information and remembrance. Each is marked with the informant's initials.

As a teenager Edith begged to have her hair bobbed and a permanent in the new 'flapper' style, but her parents resisted. Finally they agreed and her father drove Edith into Hollywood to a beauty salon. It was Edith's first visit to Hollywood and a hairdresser When Alfred Palmer picked up his daughter, he was shocked at the sight of Edith's short, curly hair and complained to the beauty operator who tried to explain that the tight, curly "perm" made Edith's hair look shorter than it really was, but Alfred Palmer was not pleased. (EPB)

During the years that Edith and Leroy lived on the Acre, Clarence Glenn, an attorney, friend and business associate of Lovell Hill often stayed with the family. Leroy told us that once, Lovell Hill, accidentally shot Mr. Glenn in the arm, but the injury was only a flesh wound and not serious. (LEP)

During the early 1930's Grandmother Hill (Rhoda Jane Enlow Hill), had difficulty walking and used a cane until the last, two or three years of her life. At that time she insisted she could not walk at all, without help, but many mornings. crumbs were found in the kitchen after an occasional, late night snack. Her bedroom was next to the kitchen. (LEP) (RMHR)

Edith Palmer Butler told us of an event that happened to her when the family was living in Montana and she was six years old. The school Edith attended was about one mile from her house and one winter day, on her way home from school, a blizzard with blowing snow caught her about half way and she became disoriented and exhausted, so she lay down by a pile of hay seeking protection. The next thing she knew, her mother Minnie was rubbing and warming her at home. Minnie, who had been worried when the storm came up, had gone to meet her little girl and had found her lying by the haystack, unresponsive and covered with snow. Edith had not been chilled too long and she suffered no serious illness or injury from the experience. She, herself, did not remember the incident, but had heard her mother tell the story many times. (EPB)

One of Minnie's older sisters, Rhoda Hill Smith, (Mrs. Arthur Smith of Whittier, CA.) with whom their father, James David Hill Sr lived before his death. was reportedly blind. due to the use of improper medication when she was a young girl. (LEP) (EPB)

In the earliest photograph of the Hill Family. taken about 1900, in front of the original, homestead house, the young man in the white shirt holding the reins of a horse was identified as Lovell Hill. The old man with James Hill Sr was identified as an old, Civil War buddy who lived with the family and worked for board and room. Minnie is the rather tall teenage girl in the short skirt. (EPB) (LEP) (RMHR)

Leroy Palmer said his grandfather, James David Hill Sr., was friendly with an old Civil War veteran (name unknown) who, in the "old" days, lived with the family and worked for board and room. The two men often went on mineral prospecting trips up near Baker, California where they had filed a mine claim. He said that the family had owned 320 acres of land near Baker and that Minnie and her brothers and sisters still owned the property in the 1930's, but the mine claim had never paid off. (LEP)