

Youthful prank led to ride in Swanton's big auto

By CAROLYN SWIFT

One warm day in 1906, two young boys about three-years-old waited for the passing of a certain private automobile as they stood near culverts of an unpaved street that led to the beach in Santa Cruz.

Cars were rare 70 years ago, and roads were forever spotted with stench reminders that the norm for travel was a horse. Streets were designed differently

then too, and the boys — Virgil and Raymond — were well-aware that an auto traveling on Broadway had to make a near-stop as it approached the culvert.

Everyone in town knew the make and model of the few cars around, as well as owners lucky enough to afford such a novelty. Virgil and Raymond awaited one that came by nearly every day — one with a family on their way to oversee the budding tourist in-

dustry at the beach.

This family was known to trumpet novelty as a maxim and personal way-of-life. When the boys caught sight of Fred Swanton's fancy bright red Maxwell that day, they hesitated until the auto slowed for the approach — and then pelted the car as hard as they could with clods of drying horse manure.

One of those boys was Virgil Macy, a native of Santa Cruz who

has lived for the past 41 years in a small home on three acres bordering 26th Ave. and Corcoran Lagoon.

The memory of his first encounter with the famous Fred Swanton — casino owner, champion of pompous exhibitions and vendor of tourism, among other things — is one of Macy's favorite recollections.

Macy and his friend threw manure at Swanton's Maxwell on

a dare from older kids in the neighborhood. The repercussions of that deed and the events that followed, Macy says, were "typical of Fred Swanton and the way he handled people."

Macy recalls that later that afternoon he came home to find the red Maxwell parked in front of his house. He knew that meant trouble, so he ran and hid in a nearby corn patch.

"Pretty soon I heard my mother calling," he said, "So I came back around to the front of the house, acting nonchalant, as if I had no idea what was going on."

Virgil's mother told him Mr. Swanton wanted a few words with him, but what Swanton then said was the last thing the boy expected to hear.

Fred Swanton told Virgil that if he and Raymond dressed in their best clothes the next day, he would treat them to a ride in his automobile — which meant the two children would gain a distinction few others had yet experienced. They would be celebrities in the neighborhood.

"We were the only kids around who got to ride in a car," Macy said, "After that I always knew Swanton was a smart cookie, because every time he drove up Broadway Street all the older kids would call out, 'Hi, Mr. Swanton!' because they wanted a ride in his automobile." Eventually, Macy adds, many of the local children were treated to rides in the Maxwell.

Macy's memories of his childhood in Santa Cruz are vivid and varied, since he had an opportunity to observe many parts of the county on a regular basis from a very early age.

His parents were Thomas and Mary Macy, who lived on Dufour

and Bellview Avenue in Santa Cruz when Virgil was born in 1903.

Thomas Macy was a railroad blacksmith who followed construction throughout the northwest, arriving in California to seek work on the Belt System in San Francisco. Strikes on that line and on the Ocean Shore Railroad in 1902 led the father to railroad shops of the Union Traction Company in Santa Cruz, and he worked there until the streetcar line was finished between Santa Cruz and Capitola in 1904.

He then found employment as delivery wagon driver for local groceries — a job that inspired his own delivery route and the eventual establishment of a transfer business.

Most people have forgotten, Macy says, that it was still difficult in those days to move even a small load of baggage without the help of a transfer wagon. Thomas Macy spent most of his time driving the baggage of summer tourists from the railroad depot to resorts in Aptos near Santa Cruz and up the old toll road to San Lorenzo Valley.

"He would take all the luggage up to the summer homes at the start of the season," Macy said, "And a few months later he'd go back and pick it up again."

On many occasions, the elder Macy would tell his son, "Have your mother put you in clean overalls," a signal that Virgil was to be allowed a ride on the wagon with his father.

These trips gave Macy a chance to see much more of the county than children usually do — and on one occasion, when Virgil was about nine-years-old, he met a young girl named Violet Miller. She eventually became a classmate at Live Oak School,

and they married in 1921.

Violet's parents, William and Nina Miller, moved to Soquel from Seattle when she was six-years-old. Her father acquired his own well-drilling rig, and was well-known in Live Oak during a building boom between the years of 1910-25.

Many of Macy's early memories center about the train depot in Santa Cruz. Meeting the excursion trains on Sunday morning was a regular community activity then, he says,

and he recalls that he and his older brothers often sneaked aboard train coaches for a free ride to the beach. One of the more memorable characters aboard those trains was a man known as "the peanut butcher," who hawked newspapers, trinkets and candy during each regular run. Not all of Macy's recollections are pleasant ones. As a small child, he said, he once saw a man run across the tracks while two trains were approaching from

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Virgil and Violet Macy have lived in this house since 1936.

He walked to Davenport for work

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opposite directions — and while the man safely dashed across the path of one train, he was decapitated by the second.

In the years the Macy family lived near the beach, Virgil was also witness to some spectacular schemes of the Seaside Company directed by Fred Swanton.

One of the company's more adventurous undertakings, Macy said, was literally a misfire.

A topless tent was built on a baseball diamond that is now site of the Casa del Rey in Santa Cruz, and in it was constructed a balloon-type airship about 75-feet-long — complete with frame and motor.

"The same thing happened about 10 years ago in San Francisco," Macy said, "And the boy let go and was killed. But the time it happened here, the parachute performer yelled to the kid to hold on, and he did. They drifted over the ocean, and he cut himself and the boy loose when they were about 150-200 feet above water."

They were quickly picked up by boats in the area, Macy said, and neither were injured.

Macy was fascinated with air travel during his childhood, and eventually learned to fly a plane during the barnstorming days. His ambition to become a professional pilot faded after a minor accident.

The recollections of Virgil and Violet Macy extend well beyond interesting stories of their childhood years. They have observed changes in the county, experienced some of the major themes in its history — and have left touches of their work.

When the couple married in 1921, their first ambition was to "make a fortune," raising freesia bulbs on property in Live Oak. They lived in the area near the present location of Dominican Hospital, and in those days they could see all the way to Live Oak School from their house.

They gave up on freesia bulbs

after Live Oak farmers glutted the market, and Macy was a truck driver for a short time before becoming an apprentice plasterer.

In 1922, he worked generally in the Santa Cruz area, and later became a contractor. Some of the buildings that contain evidence of Macy's work are the Riverview Terrace and the Venetian Courts in Capitola, several homes on Escalona Drive in Santa Cruz, the Casa del Rey, the Del Mar Theater and Palomar Hotel. His business was called "Heidloff and Macy," contractors, and their jobs included work on the concrete ship "Palo Alto" just before its grand opening.

The couple's son, Gerald, was born in 1922, and their daughter, Sondra, arrived in 1927. By this time, Macy said, the family considered themselves "fairly well-to-do."

"But it was mostly on paper," Mrs. Macy said, "We were working on three schools at once, and were very busy when suddenly the Depression hit — and within hours everything was gone."

They never recovered the money owed to them, and spent the next few years trying just to survive.

"There is no way anyone can say they know what the Depression is about," Mrs. Macy said, "Unless you went through it."

Macy remembers one time he walked from Santa Cruz to Davenport because he had no money for gasoline. He hoped to get a job picking artichokes in the fields.

"But when I arrived, I found the word had spread around that there might be jobs," he said, "There were dozens who'd been there all night." Most of the available positions, he said, were given to Filipino laborers who already lived in Davenport.

For about two years, the Macy family had enough money to buy groceries — but that was all. There was little left for clothing or other necessities.

Macy took any job he could get, and finally obtained employment

with a steel mill operation at Rob Roy Junction — now known as La Selva Beach.

The company at La Selva had originally been a paint mill, Macy said, although they made no paint there. The mill separated black sand to provide "venetian red," for the making of red paint.

Titanium Steel Alloy Company purchased the mill, and from 1929 until about 1935 the plant processed sand for the making of steel alloy. Eventually, the firm was taken over by Columbia Steel and moved to Ohio.

The Macy family almost followed the firm to the midwest, but decided to stay in Santa Cruz County.

During World War II, Virgil became a plasterer affiliated with asbestos workers at shipyards in San Francisco, but he wanted to remain in Santa Cruz. Eventually, he took a job with Santa Cruz Food Company, which is now Pacific Coast Products.

Macy took the job at a food processing plant because it was the only way he could be released from his job in the shipyards. He never intended to stay with the company, although he remained there from 1942 until 1970.

"I gradually got to like it," he said, "After awhile I didn't want to leave."

Virgil never gave up his membership with the Cement Masons, and on Jan. 12 this year, he was one of two in the northern California region to be honored for 40 years of continuous membership.

Mr. and Mrs. Macy have been married for 55 years, and have lived in the same home since 1936. They have seen bluffs give way along the cliffs of Live Oak and Capitola, and they know places were there once were sand dunes, coves and swimming holes that no longer exist. They watched Live Oak grow to an urbanized community, and now find they must move from the three-acre homesite that continues to increase in value.

When they leave Corcoran Lagoon, Virgil and Violet Macy will be missed. Each day when Macy walks into his backyard lot, he is welcomed by a black cloud of ducks from flocks at the lagoon, and sometimes they gather in the yard and wait for him.

The airship was filled with helium, tickets were sold for the launching, a crowd gathered at the tent — but the dirigible refused to rise. The equipment was too heavy for the ship to ascend as promised.

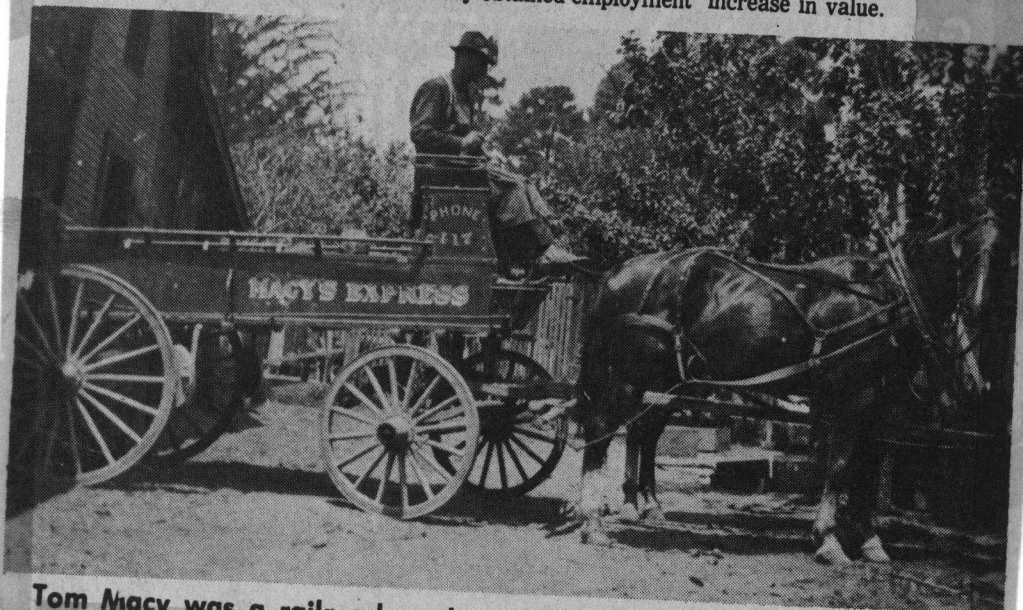
That night the airship's engine was removed to lighten the craft, and it was to remain tied to the ground for another premiere performance. About noon the following day, Virgil glanced toward the tent to see the ship break loose and rise upward. The gas had expanded during the heat of mid-day, and the ship pulled loose from its moorings to provide nearby neighbors with one brief but spectacular show — without charge.

The balloon continued to rise until it was a tiny speck, Macy said, and then it seemed to explode as it burst. Ironically, the frame of the airship returned almost exactly to its point of departure, and landed square in the center of a small island at the mouth of the San Lorenzo River.

Macy is one of the last of a workforce that once included some 10-20 children regularly "hired," to help hold and fill the Seaside Company's hot air balloon. Children were "paid" with free tickets to the roulette wheel at the beach amusement center.

The balloon was actually a prop for "The Ascension of the Red Devil," the performance of a man who held onto the balloon until he could pull free and parachute downward — at which time he began an acrobatic trapeze act.

The act was staged at the site of what is now the "Fun House," at Santa Cruz Boardwalk. Once, about 1910, a child was entangled in the ropes and dragged upward along with the "Red Devil," during a balloon ascension.



Tom Macy was a railroad worker until strikes put him in the hauling trade.