

# Ralph Mattison, 1896-1999



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel file

Ralph Mattison, pictured in 1997, died on Independence Day at age 102.

## Area loses a link with its past

Soquel centenarian had  
'seen a lot' of change

By DAN WHITE  
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✓ **SOQUEL** — Ralph Mattison was old enough to remember when "hippie" was a word for people with big hips.

He remembered when 41st Avenue was "Chick-en Alley," where families bought poultry.

When Mattison talked about the "big quake," he meant the one that ruined most of San Francisco 93 years ago.

Mattison died on the Fourth of July at age 102. But this walking Santa Cruz County history book shared plenty of stories about jalopy cars, unpaved streets and the Great Depression before he passed.

It's fortunate that area residents took the time to hear his tales and even videotape him. Otherwise, they would have missed out on descriptions of days when people drove without headlights on dirt roads, when people fought fires with water-bucket brigades.

"Up until a week ago, he could remember anything better than me," said his great niece, Sue Hoff. "He'd seen a lot."

In later years, his left eye no longer worked and he rarely left his room in an Aptos mobile home park. Often, his housemate, 90-something "kid sister" Amey Mattison Weiser, repeated visitors' questions so he could understand.

**'Pacific Avenue? Mud. Morrissey Boulevard? Nothing.'**

— **Ralph Mattison**

# Mattison

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But he never lost his descriptive powers or his humility.

Mattison, a man with wispy hair, a solid frame and a strong handshake, was hard pressed to explain his longevity.

He was no drinker or smoker. But the military told him he had a "bad heart" and would not let him fight in World War I.

It wasn't a wise assessment, considering he outlived just about everyone he knew.

Longevity was his private mystery. He just couldn't explain it.

"God almighty, I guess," he said. "Damned if I know."

Mattison wasn't one to brag, although he had reason to.

For one thing, he had a telephone when it was still considered an oddity. He had one so early that his first phone number was just 6.

He also helped shape local history by becoming Aptos' first fire chief, helping to save the Bayview Hotel from flames.

He understated his role in saving the landmark about 70 years ago.

"All I did was ring the bell like crazy and the bucket brigade came running."

In fact, it's hard to look at any Mid-County landmark that doesn't bear some connection to Mattison. Even the old, storm-battered Cement Ship of Seaclyff has a Mattison link. He used to own it.

He got the famous stationary ship because he was in the apple-drying business, and a green apple packer owed him some money.

"He owned the ship so he gave me the bill of sale," Mattison said in a 1997 interview. He said he never recorded the transaction so he wouldn't have to pay insurance on the ship.

Mattison was born in 1896 in a corner room of a stately home on Mattison Lane in Soquel. Back then, many people considered Santa Cruz a muddy backwater.

"Pacific Avenue? Mud," he recalled. "Morrissey Boulevard? Nothing."

Almost no one had cars, but Ralph's dad, a Republican county supervisor and apple dryer, splurged for one.

It hardly ripped up the asphalt. For one thing, the streets weren't paved. For another, the clunky Oldsmobile went just 15 mph. Even Ralph Sr.'s zippier upgrade, a two-cylinder Maxwell, chugged along at

just 25 mph.

On a dark night the family car, lacking headlights, nearly rolled headlong into Gilroy sheep. "Two thousand of them," Mattison said.

Mattison's stories alternated between goofy adventures and sudden tragedy.

He recalled the Spanish flu, a worldwide epidemic that killed millions of people, sweeping its way through the area. His father died from it in 1918, leaving his apple-drying and vinegar-making operations.

Mattison admitted the business world was vexing at first.

"I was a fool," he said.

A lawyer friend helped him learn the ropes. Dried apples were big business in those days before refrigerators.

Mattison and his wife Hazel built their own home in Aptos in 1918, and he served as Aptos' first fire chief starting in the 1920s. He held that post until 1962.

After retiring from the apple business, he ran a mushroom operation, and helped open Citizen's Commercial Bank in Soquel.

He had to close up when the Depression hit, and became a private lender, often helping out people who never paid him back.

Mattison survived, but the Depression turned him into a packrat. His great niece said he never threw anything away, not even rusty nails. It took his family a year to clear out possessions from his previous home.

When at last he retired from his various lines of work, he traveled for more than half of each year to the Mojave Desert, Arizona and the Sierra.

He never went to more exotic places because he refused to use airplanes.

"Didn't trust them," said his great-niece.

In the last few years, he had to settle down and stop the traveling. He enjoyed seven quiet years living with his sister in their small home.

His health took a serious downturn two weeks ago.

"My mom told me he wanted to go home," Hoff said. She took it to mean he wanted to join his wife, who had died 19 years before, just short of their 62nd wedding anniversary.

Mattison never had children. But he left behind other loved ones, including niece Della Daugherty of Watsonville.