

Artists Frank and Lillian Heath

By Margaret Koch

Frank L. Heath courted Lillian Dake Storey during painting trips around Santa Cruz County back in the 1890s.

Those were the years when Lillian was riding a saddle horse daily from Santa Cruz to the Powdermill where she taught school. Today [1974] the Powdermill is Paradise Park.

Frank's actual proposal of marriage was delivered at Rocky Falls, a beautiful scenic place on Carbonero Creek. There he had constructed a painting platform with a perfect view of the rushing waters, and it was there that he asked Lillian, in that formal day and age, to be his bride.

Frank was nearly 40 years old at the time, and Lillian was about 32.

She had always been interested in art and had talent to a large degree. She took a year's leave of absence from teaching school to travel alone to New York where she visited relatives and stayed to study china painting and the painting of miniatures which is an art in itself.

"When I returned from New York I enrolled in the art classes of a Santa Cruz artist who was making a name for himself," she once said with a smile.

The artist was Frank L. Heath, and that was the start of their romance, she told me in 1959. She accepted Frank's proposal at Rocky Falls.

At the Heath home on Third Street, Beach Hill, Frank added a wing with a large studio workroom downstairs and several bedrooms upstairs. That was his wedding gift to his bride.

"The Studio" had a fireplace and big bay windows that looked out over the town of Santa Cruz and back to the mountains they both loved and painted many times. Lillian painted a set of tiles for the fireplace; they showed darting swallows in the clouds above a stream where songbirds perched on tules and water lilies floated.

In 1897 Lillian and Frank were married in the First Methodist Church and they moved into the home on Beach Hill, a house she continued to live in for 64 years.

Frank's father, Lucien Heath, was the first Secretary of State of Oregon. He came to Santa Cruz from Oregon in 1866 with his wife Jane and sons Frank and Henry. A daughter, Lina, had died in Michigan where the Heaths lived before crossing the plains to Oregon in 1852.

In Santa Cruz Lucien Heath opened one of the early hardware stores on Pacific Avenue in partnership with John Byrne. He also had real estate interests and was elected president of Santa Cruz County Bank, and twice elected to the State Legislature. He died in 1888 while on a trip East and is buried in Evergreen Cemetery.

Lucien Heath's brother, Captain Albert Heath, saw distinguished service with Company 1, 44th Indiana Regiment, in the Civil War. He wrote an account of the Battle of Shiloh which was published.

Lucien's sons had differing interests. Henry went into the hardware business like his father, but all Frank wanted to do was paint pictures. He studied at Mark Hopkins art Institute in San Francisco, then taught there for 11 years before opening his Santa Cruz Studio. His oil paintings won many awards and were exhibited at the first Chicago World's Fair, the St. Louis World's Fair and the California State Exhibits in Los Angeles, Sacramento and San Francisco.

Lillian, who was born in Milwaukee in 1864, came to Santa Cruz with her mother and stepfather, Judge and Mrs. William D. Storey, in 1877. She graduated as a school teacher in 1822, and taught for seven years at the Powdermill School.

Lillian had joined the First Methodist Church (then the Methodist Episcopal Church) in 1877, on arrival here. She and Frank played active roles in the church's development and he served as occasional interim preacher. Lillian gave the church its beautiful rose window in memory of her mother and stepfather and Heath Hall at the church's old location on Church Street, was named in Frank and Lillian's honor.

They spent many happy days painting. Once in the spring, they took a horse and wagon trip to Yosemite to paint the famed falls and mountain crags.

Frank founded the Jolly Daubers, a local group he instructed and led on many an excursion around the county.

"He would rent a horse and carryall," Lillian reminisced in recent years. "The livery stable would send it around early in the morning to pick up each member of the art class. Then we'd go to Felton or Scotts Valley or up the coast to spend a day painting."

Would-be artists scrambled aboard the horse-drawn bus with lunches and painting equipment. The ladies wore large sunhats to protect their fragile complexions. They also carried parasols and small folding canvas seats. Wood seats in the "bus" ran the full length of both sides.

Among the ardent students was Margaret Rogers, the Monterey cowgirl-turned-artist. Another student of Frank Heath's was Lillian Howard who later taught at Santa Cruz High School and whose pen and ink sketches of early Santa Cruz landmarks, are well known today.

By 1919, life in Santa Cruz was becoming a bit more sophisticated. On October 18 of that year, a small group of local artists met to organize themselves into a formal art club—the Santa Cruz Art League. Frank Heath was elected its first president and Margaret Rogers, vice president.

Lillian had given up oils when she married, explaining in later years: "My husband's oils were so superior"—a nice way of saying she did not wish to compete. She gave lessons in china painting and the painting of miniatures, and she became a skilled watercolorist. In her later years, after Frank had died, she painted a few oils, but she never felt that her work compared to Frank's.

One notable example of her china painting was a full dinner set for 12, complete with platters, covered serving dishes and demi tasse coffees. It was very elegant with dark red floral patterns and gold trim.

When I visited the Heath home on Beach Hill as a small girl (we were related by marriage), I used to stand in awe before the huge mahogany and glass cabinet that held that dinner service. I realized, even then, that I was looking at something pretty special.

Frank Heath died in 1921, just a few days after a number of his oils had been destroyed in a fire at Mount Hermon where they were on display at the time. Lillian never told him—he was very ill. But she mourned their loss for years—as well as her personal loss.

She lived for 40 years alone in the Beach Hill home, renting out part of it as apartments. She painted up until a year or two before she died in August of 1961, aged 97. She was sweet-tempered and interested in everything up to her last day.

I remember her as a dear little person from another age who wore longish dresses and gold chains and amethysts, spoke softly and was a "lady" in the finest sense of that old fashioned word.

Sources

- *This article originally appeared in the Santa Cruz Sentinel August 25, 1974, p. 19. ©1974 Margaret Koch. It is used here by permission of Margaret Koch.*

The content of this article is the responsibility of the individual author. It is the Library's intent to provide accurate local history information. However, it is not possible for the Library to completely verify the accuracy of individual articles obtained from a variety of sources. If you believe that factual statements in a local history article are incorrect and can provide documentation, please contact the Webmaster.