

Nuggets from the Past ‘Cap:’ A Lifetime in Foresthill By Norman McLeod

Foresthill old-timers will recall the late James Lawrence “Cap” Gonzales, who for years lived on Church Street in the downtown district. On a rainy, dismal morning, Feb. 20, 1979, I taped his oral history inside his home, one year prior to his death.

Newcomers on the Divide may sometimes give thought to what life was like in Foresthill before the era of inflationary prosperity settled upon our nation. Cap’s brief biography here may give us an insight into this aspect of the past.

He was born on May 11, 1903, “. . . in a little place down under the hill,” he began. “When I first started school I used the name Lawrence,” he continued. “One morning on the way to school I wore a red cap and one of the boys went to calling me ‘redcap.’ Eventually the ‘red’ was dropped but the ‘cap’ stayed and I still have it, ever since grammar school.”

Cap went on, eager to talk. “Later we moved from my birthplace to the old Foresthill townsite down under the hill. My father had property there. There were still five other families living there but in time all of us moved up to the new town on the ridgetop. This was in the early 1950’s, I think.”

Cap’s father was also born in Foresthill, in 1863. His mother was a native of Angel’s Camp, California. The couple had six children, all boys. Cap was the youngest.

The elder Gonzales worked mostly as a miner and labored many years in the Baltimore Mine, close to town. He also was a good violinist and played in a local dance band with his brother and several of his older sons under the name, “Mountain Belle Orchestra.” It played often in the third Forest House that burned down when the entire block was destroyed by fire.

“Foresthill was a bigger town then,” Cap stated. He recalled that the old Forest House was referred to frequently as the “opera house” because of its huge stage, 40 feet wide, 20 feet high and 75 feet deep. For one of its curtains a giant American flag was used, with measurements of 20 feet by 40 feet, same as the stage. All types of traveling shows appeared on that stage—plays, musicals, concerts, even operas.

A girl in Cap’s school class, Inez Burke, later played piano in his dad’s band. As a young adult Inez opened a dry goods store next to the Iron Door in the Odd Fellows building and names it the Mountain Belle Store. This store had different

owners and later was moved to another location, but its name stuck.

About 1914 the Baltimore Mine struck rich diggings, opening up employment. Miners flocked in from other areas and during the next three years it was a lively town. Then the demands of World War I shut down most of the mines.

“Meanwhile, my dad’s band was growing bigger and better,” Cap related. “It was kept busy in town, never had to go on the road. After the big 1918 fire it played in the Rea Hotel across the street, until about 1933 when it, too, was destroyed by fire.”

In 1919, Cap went to work underground for the Baltimore Mine, his first job. He was just 16. “I was big for my age,” he said. “This job lasted about a month when I was laid off. Work in those days was sporadic. If you got a month or two here and three months there you were lucky. Our salary was \$3.50 per day, eight hours a day, six days a week.” These were the same wages paid miners in the 1850s.

The Baltimore worked off and on during the postwar recession. Cap was employed in it occasionally in 1928 and 1929, again in 1931. At the time its new owners were attempting to connect to the old Mayflower Mine tunnel on the other side of town, about two miles distant. They failed in their attempt. Cap thought they ran out of funds.

He worked in their long bedrock tunnel where the conditions were bad. “There was no air and the tunnel floor was wet. One awful day I quit work when I was about a mile-and-a-half inside the mine. I had to slosh through the muck and water, and it took me an hour-and-a-half to get home. That did it for me. I never went back. I’m convinced if I’d stayed on the job I wouldn’t be here today,” he said.

Cap’s career as a miner next fastened to the Four Aces Mine (now the Three Queens). Its owners spent a lot of money building a road down to in and putting in heavy machinery. This was in 1926. He was offered a job in 1927 and worked there with about 60 other men. Next year the owners doubled the price of their stock and nobody bought it. The money stopped coming in and mining halted.

In 1935 another outfit took over, bringing their Mexican workers with them. This time they found gold “going in all directions.” Local men were hired to add to the working force. Clair Storey and Cap were employed, Cap as a hoist man, his old job. This lasted for about a year-and-a-half, when the gold pay chute gave out. The mine again shut down, and once more Cap was out of a job.

This was a time when living conditions were harsh on everyone. The nation's economics were deep in the bowels of the Great Depression. Nobody had any money. Still, the purchasing power of a single dollar bill was amazing. A person could buy a quart of milk, a loaf of bread and an ice cream cone or candy bar for the kid and have 75 cents left. This was deflation.

Cap found another part-time position with the local Forest Service in road construction. The boss, an old personal friend, offered him a steady job working out of Nevada City. This was tempting to Cap. A steady job of any kind was universally considered the ultimate achievement. It took some deep considerations, but in the end he refused the offer because it meant he would be working too far from home, away from his family.

After more part-time jobs in the mines, in 1938 he worked a full year for Charlie Finning in a sawmill. The next year he was back in mining, this time in the Buckeye Mine behind Lutie Dorer's place.

During the winter of 1939-40, Cap and his brother Joe went prospecting and found enough gold to buy groceries, about a pound-and-a-half. Gold wasn't worth much then. Following this venture Cap and his brother split; he found employment in the Jarvis Mine, off the hiss from the Forks House. Here he worked a year, until its owners ran out of money.

He next worked in a chromium mine up near the Sugar Pine Government Camp. Solid chrome. They hauled it out by the truckload to Auburn, then shipped it via rail to the East. Cap earned \$4 a day. Once again it didn't last.

Finally, in 1944, he accepted an offer from Bill Hughes to work in the lumber business. "I'd been trying to keep out of going into lumber," he said. "We needed to eat so I went to work for Bill. They put me on an edger, and I stayed on that job the next 17 years."

At age 58, Cap quit the lumber business for a steady job with the Foresthill School District as a bus driver. He was the 32nd applicant for the job. He thought he landed it because he had been driving a bus part time at the sawmill. The school position lasted until 1972, when he was forced to retire at age 69.

Cap still had memories from his childhood. When he was about 5 he loved playing on a huge Indian grinding rock, "down the hill below the Access Road." I tried several times to locate this rock, without success. Finally, in 1989, Bill Martinsen guided me to the rock. Yes, it was full of grinding holes. It was located

in a wooded jungle just off the Access Road, a short distance from town, on private property.

Cap enjoyed playing baseball (hardball) from 1931 to 1946 in the Foothill League. One year his team won the championship.

“Back in 1924 I helped fight a huge forest fire with Ed Power,” he recalled. “Ed rented a couple saddle horses to the government and my father-in-law and I rode them along the fire line for a week. Then again in 1960 I fought the big fire. I was working for Hughes Brothers then. It was a miserable job.”

Cap was born, raised and died on the Foresthill Divide. His widow, Lena, advises he made one trip to San Francisco and several trips to Reno; otherwise he remained close to home.

During our interview his final statement was: “If I’ve contributed anything to history I guess it was all worth it.”

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