

Local historian took 30-year hiatus

It took Foresthill author and historian, Norman McLeod, better than 30 years to return to his first love - writing about history.

A life-long lover of things historic and blessed with an affinity for the great outdoors, the Duluth, Minn., native first became enamoured with putting pen to paper during World War II. A Navy Chief Petty Officer, ultimately attached to the staff of Adm. William F. "Bull" Halsey, McLeod was stationed on an isolated island in the South Pacific for 23 months.

"Just for something to do," he said, "I decided to do a piece for a Naval magazine. I was published for the first time. Another of the writers for this periodical happened to be a very young Arthur Haley, a member of the U.S. Coast Guard."

A transfer to New Zealand prompted the now 78-year-old McLeod to pen a piece about his new duty station. This article was ultimately picked up by his hometown newspaper, the Duluth Herald. After the war, he accepted a job as a cub reporter on the Herald, and started writing professionally.

"However," he said, "I was married with a child, and the financial sacrifice was too severe. I left to work for the Great Northern Railway. That netted me a transfer to California in 1946, and ultimate employment with Richfield Oil."

Putting writing on the back burner, he ultimately retired from the petroleum giant, now known as ARCO, 30 years later in 1976.

McLeod and his wife, Esther, had a home in Oakland. For years, they suffered from the fog, cold weather and overcast skies. "We were familiar with Foresthill," he said, "and had the good fortune to find a home here we could afford in 1978."

The main lures to Foresthill were its historic lore, the fact that the sun shone, overcast was minimal - and, there was no fog.

It didn't take McLeod long to resume his abandoned writing career. He co-founded the Foresthill Divide Community Forum newspaper with a friend in the late fall of 1978, assuming full ownership in the fall of 1979. It's brief reign was only 2-1/2 years. And - surprise - the main focus of the publication were subjects historic.

McLeod quickly immersed himself in Foresthill lore and tradition, learning about the area from public library research, rare old books and from long conversations with old timers. "Many times these old fellows would dig out some old newspapers that would yield great resources of information."

Another valuable fountain of knowledge was discovered in the person of naturalist Gene Markley. "He taught a class for Placer County Adult Education, and was an avid hiker," said McLeod. "I was a member of his hiking group for 10 years and that experience provided me with a wealth of material."

Following Markley around The Divide exposed McLeod to ghost towns, abandoned gold mines and vine-covered trails he never would have found if left to his own devices.

In the 16 years since his arrival in Foresthill, McLeod has written for a variety of publications, among them Modern Maturity and Sierra Heritage Magazine. He was a regular contributor to the Auburn Journal for five years, appearing in the Sunday magazine supplement.

McLeod is the author of two books: "Gold, Guns and Gallantry," published in 1987, and "Distant Voices, Different Drums," a 1990 production.

For over five years, he has been a contributor to the Foresthill Messenger, writing his highly-acclaimed, history-oriented Nuggets from the Past column.

Norman and Esther McLeod are the parents of three daughters, three granddaughters and three great-grandchildren.

"I do this simply for the love," he said, referring to his work. "Not to make a lot of money. I'll never get rich at it.

"I really do it to leave something behind."

Foresthill Focus
By Special Correspondent Chuck Butler



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