

The Novato Historian

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Preserving Novato's History Feature Section

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Down Memory Lane The Man Who Put Novato On The Map

by Mike Read



Sellmer as a young man in the 1930s

Walter B. Sellmer is, quite literally the man who put Novato on the map. He was Novato's first speed cop back when it was, little more than a wide place in the road. If you've never received a ticket in Novato, it's because Walter Sellmer is no longer the town's "speed cop." The city slickers may have been able to roar through San Rafael and lesser towns on their way north but a good many of them were nailed in a place called Novato that wasn't even on the map – until they decided to pencil it in for future reference.

Novato's reputation as nemesis began with Sellmer, a young chicken farmer

who was irked one day in 1916 when he was driving a horse and wagon up to Petaluma. He was brushed off the road by a car that "must have been doing 30 miles per hour" which panicked his horse and chickens.

Sellmer, whose chicken ranch was located approximately where the old Novato General Hospital was, hastened himself to Judge Herman Rudolff or Constable Tom Sutton (two different stories) to complain about the speeders. He was hired on the spot to catch the culprits as Deputy Constable.

Early Years

Sellmer was born on May 16, 1891 in San Francisco (corner of Harrison and 24th Street) south of Market. He remembers cooking dinner "in the middle of the street" after the earthquake of 1906 and his first job was as a messenger for an earthquake relief agency running back and forth between refugee camps with messages for \$36 per month "which was pretty good then."

As a teen he was a featherweight boxer in San Francisco. The 1910 U.S. Census shows him living with his parents and single.

In 1912 his father, Jacob (born 1869 in Germany – died 1968 in Stinson Beach), an upholsterer and carpet lay-

er, bought a chicken ranch in Novato. By that time Sellmer had married his first wife, Hazel Rhoepke Sellmer McCamish (1896-1960) and also settled in Novato, with his parents.

He will have two sons with Hazel, Walter J. (1914-2008), who worked for the telephone company in Novato and Petaluma and Harry (1917-1993), a proofreader in San Francisco.

In June 1915, Walt files for his place to be known as the Novato Rabbitry.

The 1920 U.S. Census shows Walt living with his parents in San Anselmo with his wife Hazel and two sons.

Souped-up Ford

Sellmer didn't give warnings. He patrolled the town in a souped-up Ford, packing a 30-30 rifle and a pair of boxing gloves. Under his direction, Novato became known as the "speed trap" of Marin County. Sellmer would put a chain or heavy rope across Redwood Boulevard north of Sweetser Avenue (then the main highway through town), sit down on a neighboring porch, and watch for cars through his binoculars. When he spotted one going too fast, he would put up the chain or rope to make the driver stop, then charge him with speeding. Sellmer got a dollar for each arrest and every Monday morning he'd bring Judge Rudolff a

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sack of money. He became so famous that he had to resort to disguises to catch wary motorists.

Sellmer recalls many a trial held at Judge Rudolf's cheese factory near the railroad tracks in Novato. "The judge always doubled the fine if the suspect spoke German," he said, "but then he always gave everyone he fined a box of cheese to take home."

There were those who tried to get rid of Sellmer and his buck fine and at one time the chairman of the board of supervisors complained that things were so bad "people had to walk through Novato to avoid being arrested."

Sellmer attacked his job scientifically. He'd post himself behind a haystack, stop watch in hand and keep his eye on the road between two tall trees. By counting the time elapsed for a car to go from tree to tree, he could tell whether they were going above 30 miles per hour and thereby breaking the law.

Here are some stories that appeared in the Sausalito News:

April 7, 1917 - NOVATO SPEED COP ROUNDS UP SEVEN - L. Lerda, San Francisco wine merchant, and Victor Howard, a druggist, are aware since their experience in Novato last Sunday that the law forbids them to travel 40 miles an hour in automobiles. They were in the height of an exhilarating race against each other; for a coveted narrow strip of roadway when Speed Officer W.B. Sellmer bobbed up in the offing with a stopwatch. At Sellmer's polite request they signed their names to a little promise to appear before Justice of the Peace Rudolff in Novato to explain away the damaging testimony of the speed officer. Sellmer rounded up seven violators that day, five for violations of the speed law and two for failure to exhibit license numbers.



1953 Sellmer with Fred Nave on the radio

ing. The Annie, spick and span is in commission, ready for the opening of the yachting season. Dan C. Whaley, for-

merly a well known resident of Sausalito was also arrested by Sellmer.

August 11, 1917 - San Rafael—Acting District Attorney Wallace L. Ware of Sonoma county was arrested near Novato by Speed Officer W. B. Sellmer for violating the speed laws. Sellmer said Ware was running his machine at forty miles an hour when he was overhauled.

Sept. 8, 1917 - NOVATO SPEED COP ARRESTS SEVENTEEN - Speed Officer W. B. Sellmer of Novato turned in a long list of alleged traffic law violators following the exodus of motorists from San Francisco over the week-end. Those who are instructed to appear before Judge Rudolff for hearing were:

October 6, 1917 - A little comedy was introduced Tuesday to offset the serious business, when Speed Officer Sellmer of Novato appeared before the board of supervisors with Constable Sutton to explain the intricate system of book-keeping they were alleged to be employing when presenting their claims for fees to the board.

Sellmer is appointed by Sutton, and thus his regulation is not within the jurisdiction of the board. Because his superior refuses to dispense with in services, although the board deems they are unnecessary he insists that he will remain on the road and do his duty as long as he wears a star.

There was a pleasant interchange of repartee between Sellmer and the board members, and it was punctuated with laughs on both sides, particularly when Sellmer asked Chairman Burke if he expected to run for re-election.

"That's three years away yet," replied Burke, "and you'll be in the army by that time."

"I'd be there now if you could put me there." Sellmer answered.

"You bet I would," Burke laughed. Although everybody laughed, the claims of Sutton and Sellmer were not passed, and they will wait until next month - at least.

His 1917 Draft Card read #33 - Farmer in Novato and is 1941 Draft Card read U1007.

When California Governor, William D. Stephens, visited Novato he was "arrested by Sellmer and Sutton and taken before Judge Rudolff's court," (held, of course, in the Rudolff Cheese Factory). It was a hoax, of course, and Rudolff gave the Governor a box of cheese.

But his career as a speed cop ended when he ticketed a constable (Sutton or DeLucchi) with a lot of clout for parking on the wrong side of the road and was fired on the spot.

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Sellmer wasn't unemployed long, however, as his diligence had not escaped the notice of the state game warden who recommended him for the job of catching poachers and violators of fish and game regulations in the county.

Game Warden

That was the beginning of a long career in law enforcement for Walter Bruno Sellmer who went on to become a game warden:



Sellmer disguised as a hobo in 1920's

Ross, for shooting ducks, cottontails, squirrels and song birds. They were turned over to Probation Officer Thomas O'Connor. Sellmer says it is his intention to put a stop to the violation of the game laws by boys and young men.

February 26, 1920 - DUCK DINNER RUINED BY GAME WARDEN *Marin IJ* - August Hudaume, who takes care of a little hunting shack on the shore of Tomales bay at Bivalve for a party of San Franciscans, had a nice duck dinner prepared for his guests last Sunday. But he failed to reckon on a visit from Game Warden W.B. Sellmer. With the fire in the stove burning merrily and the plump birds in appetizing array on the sideboard, the party of men and women were painfully shocked when Sellmer opened the door and strode in. Sellmer had heard shots coming from the cabin window and had seen Hudaume's dog retrieve the game from the water earlier in the morning.

Hudaume confessed his guilt and accompanied Sellmer to the office of Justice of the Peace Lamb at Inverness, where he paid a fine of \$25.

January 22, 1921 *Marin IJ* - Warren Dutton, superintendent of the Marin Meadows farm of the California Packing, Corporation, was arrested last Friday night by Deputy Game Commissioner, W. B. Sellmer for shooting water fowl after sunset. Arraigned Saturday morning before Justice of the Peace Herman Rudolff at Novato, Dutton plead not guilty. He will appear for trial tomorrow morning. According to Sellmer's statement, Dutton had been in the habit of feeding the ducks in a pond on the property and

placing decoys in a nearby slough. As the ducks finished eating, Sellmer said, they flew to join the decoys and were shot in transit. Sellmer seized two birds which he said Dutton had shot.

One day in 1925 his profession was nearly his undoing when he rowed a skiff out to an old barge off McNear's Beach to watch for commercial fishermen who might be up to no good. The skiff drifted away and stranded him on the barge for four days.

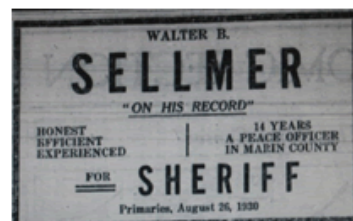
The San Francisco papers came out with big headlines saying "Game Warden Slain" after his car was found on the beach and he failed to return home. But that turned out to be wishful thinking so far as poachers were concerned. Not a strong swimmer, Sellmer saved himself anyway by breaking off pieces of wood from the barge and lashing them together with bits of rope he also found on the barge.

Thus he built himself a raft and sailed to the mainland, hungry but healthy.

August 31, 1929 *Novato Advance* - A joke, which struck terror to the hearts of the uninformed, was perpetrated at the Business Men's Club dinner. All ready to partake of the venison repast with dumplings, Game Warden Walter Sellmer entered and forbid anyone to eat the venison, as he was informed a doe had been killed for the purpose. Walter was given the "ha! ha!" But he was so earnest, apparently, that some of the boys saw the loss of a good meal. Judge Rudolff, who was in on the joke, remonstrated and finally persuaded the Game Warden and his good wife to sit down and enjoy the meal. The venison was donated by L. J. Nave, and the club members certainly enjoyed the treat. Mr. Sellmer spoke briefly on the enforcement of game laws, as did also Mrs. Sellmer, the only female warden. During the previous two years she arrested some fifty-nine violators.

Sheriff

When Sheriff Keating died in office after being in office from 1910 to 1929, Sellmer decided to run for sheriff. He would run against 8 other men and win, a post to which he was reelected six times and held 24 years before being out voted in 1954 by the late David Menary Sr. When Sellmer took over as Sheriff, he would be paid \$300 a month and be in command of a three-member sheriff's staff that included Undersheriff Bud Blum and Deputy Earl Ammerman.



San Quentin break, in 1935, four prisoners involved. The warden of San Quentin, James Hobhan, was hosting the prison board at lunch. The prisoners, led by Rudolph Straight,

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entered the lunchroom with guns, the warden immediately lunged for the phone, but he was badly injured by Straight, who pistol-whipped him. Hobhan never recovered from his injuries. Then the prison board secretary, Mark Noon, finding a gun at his back, phoned the gate and called for the warden's car, so the four prisoners with their captives were allowed to escape.

They headed towards Black Point, but Sheriff Sellmer had enough presence of mind to raise the drawbridge (old-timers will remember when there was a drawbridge across the Petaluma River), so they were thwarted in their attempt to reach Sonoma. Instead, they headed for Tomales. At Valley Ford they were stopped by a roadblock. Straight was killed, the three other prisoners were captured, but the president of the prison board and a director were slightly wounded in the fray.

Sellmer would spend nearly 40 years as a peace officer. During that time he divorced his first wife, Hazel and his second wife, Mary (whom he had deputized as the first woman game warden in the state). He would have another son with Mary, William (1923-1984), a correctional officer at San Quentin prison. His third wife was Semiana Silva Sellmer (1909-1994), mother of his daughter Eunice Sellmer Rusch (1928-1993). That marriage also ended in divorce.



Sellmer in 1953 photo, is show testing a new 5-cent candy

and just in his little paper.”

Since hanging up his gun in 1955, Sellmer has acquired a reputation as a humanitarian because of his efforts on behalf shut-ins and the handicapped. The man appeared

to be indefatigable and spent his days walking the beaches and pounding out letters of encouragement to handicapped people across the country.

Since 1953 he lived at Stinson Beach although he had planned to spend his retirement years traveling. Instead his father became ill and rather than “put him in a home” Sellmer decided to take care of his father himself. His father finally died in 1968 at the age of 98 and Sellmer never did take all the trips he'd planned on.

Perhaps it was the caring of his aged father that turned Sellmer on to helping shut-ins. Of those years he says, “they paid off in terms of contentment. I found if you really do for others, it makes you feel good about everything.”

He used his pension from the sheriff's department to buy gifts for handicapped people whom he contacted through the National Shut-In Society, of which he was a California's representative. He even went so far as to learn to write in braille so that the blind could read his messages and inspirational poems.

He would rather be the leaneer than the leaner and to that end goes out of his way to offer solace to those who got the short end of the stick in this life.

1930 US Census shows Walt living in San Rafael with his wife Mary and son William

1940 US Census shows Walt living in San Rafael, not married, with an 8th grade education, and making \$3700 per year as sheriff.

Death

Novato Advance Aug. 25, 1982

Walter Sellmer, August 20, 1982

Walter Bruno Sellmer of Stinson Beach, a former Novato “speed cop” who also served 24 years as Marin Sheriff, died Friday at the age of 91.

Services were held Tuesday at Keaton's Mortuary in San Rafael. Mr. Sellmer began his 40-year Marin law enforcement career in the early 1900s. He served as Marin County sheriff from 1930 to 1954. Survivors include three sons, Walter J., Harry C., and William R. Sellmer; one daughter, Eunice Rusch; four grandchildren; and two great-grandchildren. Memorial contributions are preferred by the family to Hospice of Marin.

Sources of Information:

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