

## Water, Electricity and the Telephone in Novato: The Families Cain

By John Trumbull

Whenever you turn on the water tap or pick up the telephone here in Novato, you should think of the Cain family. It was through their efforts that both of these systems, which we now take for granted, were started in the Novato Valley.

Marvin and Frances (White) Cain were not among the first residents of Novato, since it was 1899 when they



*Marvin and Frances Cain—wedding photo*

arrived from Indiana via the Oklahoma Territory and Oregon (where their four daughters married and stayed). They settled on 75 acres near Black Point with their two boys, James William and Albert, and one daughter, Mollie (who later married James Fox). Marvin became a local farmer, adding 500 acres by lease to the 75 he owned.

James William, known most of his life as Will, kept traveling. He (together with Mollie and James Fox) went to Alaska to search for gold. After 18 months he had accumulated about \$2,000, but lost Mollie to typhoid fever. He returned to the Black Point area to farm and help develop the land. It was at this time he discovered the need for tele-

phone service to that area. The Sunset Telephone Company had staked out a franchise for Novato, but they had not done much to develop the service.

In January of 1908, Will Cain (now almost age 29) wrote to Bessie Thomas (now age 18), the girl who he was courting by mail in Virginia, that he had just "made arrangements with the Sunset Telephone Co. to take over what phone apparatus they have at Novato so I will have control of the town and adjoining county." [Letter is quoted in May Ungemach's book, *Novato Township*.] He started forthwith to dig the holes necessary to construct a line



*The Cain house near Black Point where Marvin and Frances Cain lived. They were the parents of James W. and Albert J. Cain.*

from Novato to Grandview (in Black Point). This effort stands as testament to the physical exertions Will, and later his brother Albert, would expend in service to Novato.

In 1911 Will received permission from the Marin County Board of Supervisors to construct an electrical service grid in the northern end of the county. Will built a substation near Novato and extended service to both the town and the Black Point area. Albert, who had moved

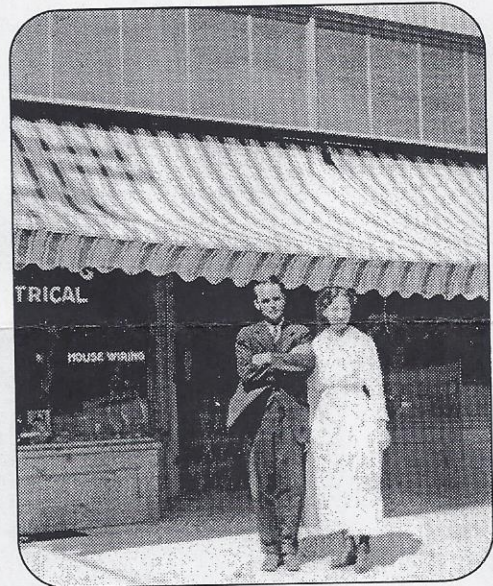
Cain brothers either personally dug or supervised the digging by others of the wells from which they supplied water to the wood stave holding tank (the foundations of which were hand dug) they constructed on the hill top between the Kuser and Hayden (now the Hilltop Café) houses. Novato was fortunate in having a plentiful supply of accessible, good quality, subterranean water. In 1919 the wooden tank was replaced by a 90,000 gallon concrete reservoir to meet the growing demand for water in the Old Town area. [The North Marin Water District, which bought the Cain system in 1949, maintains a steel water tank at this same location today.] The first water tank was convenient to Will's home, because he had by 1913 become a neighbor of the Carlisle family. Will bought the house on Reichert Avenue that was just south of and the twin to



*James William Cain*

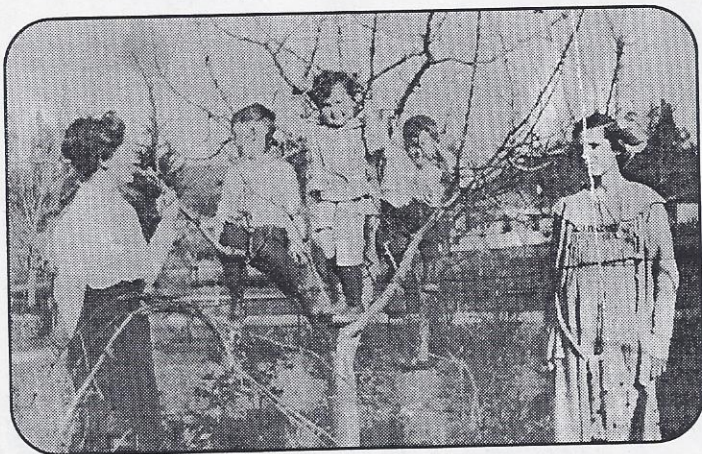
*Picture taken circa 1901, age approximately 20 years.*

from Novato to Bishop, California, where he worked for the Nevada-California Power Company, returned to Novato in 1912 and joined Will in the businesses.



*James William and Bessie Cain in front of the Telephone and Electric Company, Novato.*

“Uncle Ed” and Clara Carlisle’s house on the southwest corner of Reichert and DeLong Avenues (which building is presently home to the Novato Chamber of Commerce and several other businesses).



*Clara Carlisle & Bessie Cain have the three Cain Boys (Guy, Homer aka Fuzzy and William Albert) “up a tree.”*

Together the brothers saw the need for a municipal water system. In this current era of backhoes, trenching machines and bulldozers, it is difficult to imagine constructing a municipal water system by hand labor. The

In 1916 the Novato Utilities Company was formally incorporated, combining the three businesses the Cain brothers operated: the telephone service, the water service and the electrical service. A large majority of the company stock was retained by Albert and Will, who served as company president and general manager. Other officers were Robert H. Trumbull, Sr. (vice president), W. Albert Cain (secretary/treasurer) [Question: is this Will’s son who was born in 1909?], with A. D. Scott and Frank Silva as additional directors. The company operated from a building on the northeastern corner of Grant and Machin

In 1911 Will received permission from the Marin County Board of Supervisors to construct an electrical service grid in the northern end of the county. Will built a substation near Novato and extended service to both the town and the Black Point area. Albert, who had moved

Cain brothers either personally dug or supervised the digging by others of the wells from which they supplied water to the wood stave holding tank (the foundations of which were hand dug) they constructed on the hill top between the Kuser and Hayden (now the Hilltop Café) houses. Novato was fortunate in having a plentiful supply of accessible, good quality, subterranean water. In 1919 the wooden tank was replaced by a 90,000 gallon concrete reservoir to meet the growing demand for water in the Old Town area. [The North Marin Water District, which bought the Cain system in 1949, maintains a steel water tank at this same location today.] The first water tank was convenient to Will's home, because he had by 1913 become a neighbor of the Carlisle family. Will bought the house on Reichert Avenue that was just south of and the twin to



*James William Cain*

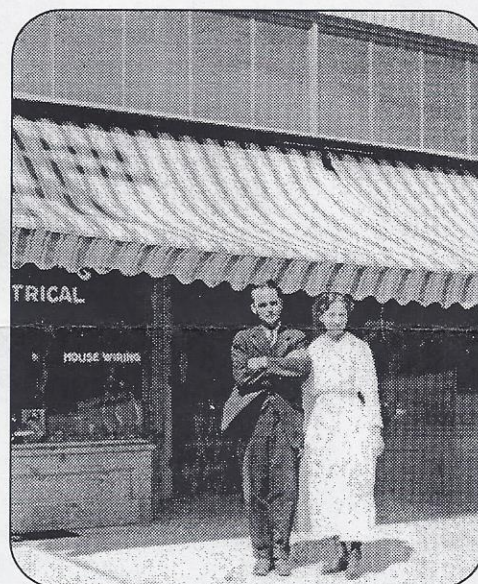
*Picture taken circa 1901, age approximately 20 years.*

from Novato to Bishop, California, where he worked for the Nevada-California Power Company, returned to Novato in 1912 and joined Will in the businesses.



*Clara Carlisle & Bessie Cain have the three Cain Boys (Guy, Homer aka Fuzzy and William Albert) "up a tree."*

Together the brothers saw the need for a municipal water system. In this current era of backhoes, trenching machines and bulldozers, it is difficult to imagine constructing a municipal water system by hand labor. The



*James William and Bessie Cain in front of the Telephone and Electric Company, Novato.*

"Uncle Ed" and Clara Carlisle's house on the southwest corner of Reichert and DeLong Avenues (which building is presently home to the Novato Chamber of Commerce and several other businesses).

In 1916 the Novato Utilities Company was formally incorporated, combining the three businesses the Cain brothers operated: the telephone service, the water service and the electrical service. A large majority of the company stock was retained by Albert and Will, who served as company president and general manager. Other officers were Robert H. Trumbull, Sr. (vice president), W. Albert Cain (secretary/treasurer) [Question: is this Will's son who was born in 1909?], with A. D. Scott and Frank Silva as additional directors. The company operated from a building on the northeastern corner of Grant and Machin

Avenues which was built by and leased from Fred Mahlstedt in 1917, and which the company purchased in 1918.

Albert married Della Decker from Weed, California in 1908. She was working as a secretary in a San Francisco Lumber company, and always told her grandchildren that she and Al were "shook together by the earthquake." Al and Della had two daughters: Alta, who married Joseph Cambell in 1933 and left Novato, and Dorothy Genevieve, who married Lawrence Tresch in the Presbyterian church in 1935 and stayed in Novato. Larry and Dorothy lived behind the telephone company office and worked in the Cain family businesses except for a period during WW II when Larry served his country as an electrician at Mare Island. He returned to Novato in 1951 and built and managed the Tresch Electric Co. until his death in 2002. Their daughter, Maureen presently lives in the residence built on



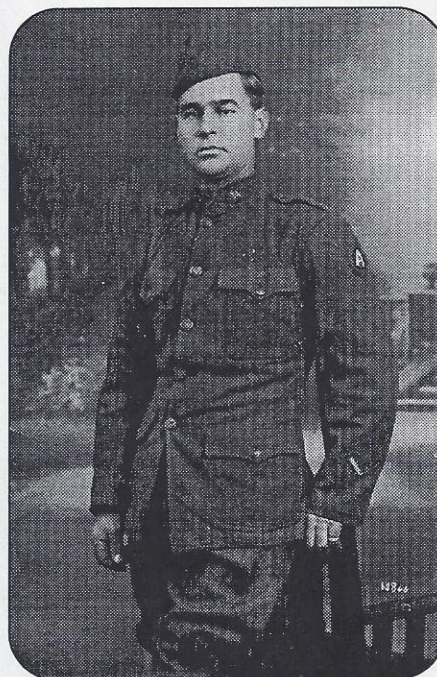
*Della (Decker) Cain aka Mrs. A.J. Cain "up a tree." This family photo shows that Della had a great sense of humor.*

the site of the Albert Cain home in the historical district of Sherman Avenue.

In 1917, World War I started, and Albert Cain enlisted and was involved in the battles of Chateau Thierry and the Argonne. While Al was away, Will cared for both Cain families and ran the businesses. Albert returned to Novato and the businesses in 1919.

In 1925, Novato valley residents formed a Sanitary District, and elected Will to the first Board of Commissioners. By 1927 the telephone company required a switchboard with 150 lines. Demand for services took another big spurt with the advent of the Hamilton Field Army Air Base in the mid 1930's.

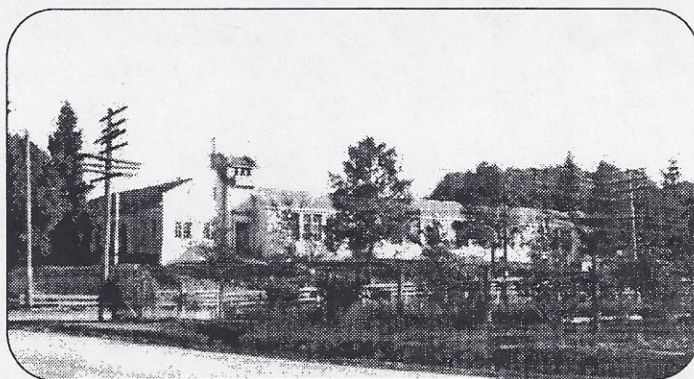
In the late 1930's Will sold his interest in the Novato Utility Company to his brother, Albert and moved his family to a 2000 acre ranch near Dos Palos in the Central Valley. Daughter Virginia Krippner (who had just completed the first grade at the time of the move) recalls that



*Albert Cain—photo taken in 1918*

some of the impetus for the move was that Will saw little future in Novato for his sons (William Albert and Guy Cain were out of San Rafael High School by then, and Homer A. (aka Fuzzy) was close to graduating).

She relates that the boys, although hard working in the family businesses, were high spirited to the extent of aggravating both Ms. Lulu Sutton (the grammar school



*Novato Grammar School*

principal) and the local character, Bruno Schultz. As in any small town, a reputation for mischief can be hard to live down, and Will decided a change of scene and occupation would be a tonic. This was a decision the boys reportedly accepted reluctantly. It appears they were already infected with flying fever from the activity at

Hamilton because while W. Albert stayed with businesses related to utilities, Guy and Homer both became commercial pilots with United Airlines.

Virginia married Everett Krippner at Edwards Air Force Base, where she was an instructor on the Link Trainer (one of the pioneering "computer games" that instructed pilots how to locate the approach path for an airfield runway in zero visibility conditions by listening to variations of tone in a radio signal). Everett was a B-24 pilot who became a school administrator after his service.

Virginia was the subject of a newspaper story in the May 21, 1938, *Novato Advance* written after Will and Bessie had come back for a visit. It seems that young Virginia was riding her pony in a field also occupied by a 2 year old bull who had been considered gentle. The bull was having a bad day, however, and he charged the pony, knocking Virginia to the ground. The pony left riderless, and was found some two hours later when Bessie Cain went looking for her overdue daughter. Virginia was located lying uninjured but motionless in the field with the bull



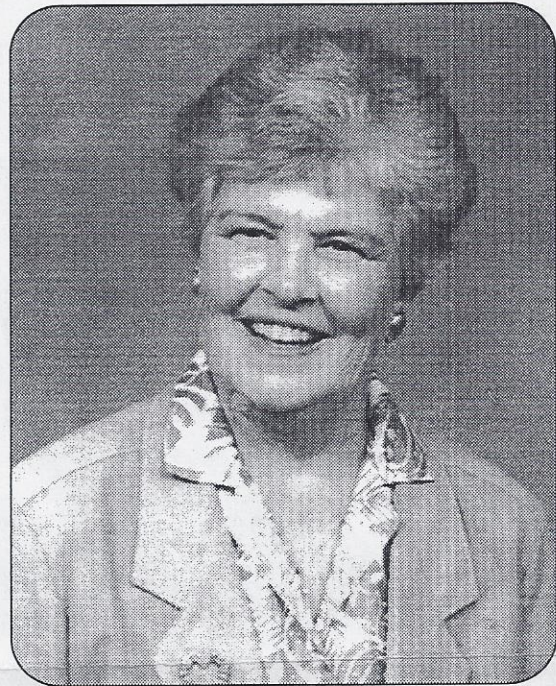
*Dorothy Tresch (l), and Bessie Cain in the backyard of the Cain house, 849 Reichert.*

nearby still pawing the ground aggressively. The news article notes "There is no doubt that Virginia owes her life to the fact that she kept completely still until help came."

The Novato History Museum is fortunate to have an oral history recently given by Virginia Krippner in its collection of oral histories. This interview has been the source for this article and the Novato Memories printed elsewhere in this issue of *The Novato Historian*. I have also borrowed heavily from the delightful book, *Novato Township* by May Rogers Ungemach

Although Virginia was too young to remember it well or to go visiting there (as a preschooler she was restricted to visiting the Carlisle store and the Cain offices, but

warned to stay away from the dangerous railroad tracks), she lived just around the hill from the Hermann Rudolff cheese factory. This establishment overlooked the tracks at what used to be the end of DeLong Avenue before the freeway overpass erased it. Despite being one of four cheese factories in Novato, Judge Rudolff's was probably the most memorable for a number of travelers from San



*Virginia Cain Krippner, October 2006*

Francisco heading for a weekend at the Russian River for two reasons. First it produced a desirable selection of cheeses which were (according to the recollection of Francis Bond McGlauflin published in the *Novato Advance* for January 23, 1963) "attractively wrapped and boxed." The other reason was that Judge Rudolff (a Justice of the Peace) held traffic court, whenever needed, in a room adjacent to the showroom of his factory.

Novato in the 1930's was well known as a traffic trap en route to the Russian River. The procedure was to arrest the offending driver, deliver him directly to the "courtroom," have him sentenced by Judge Rudolff, collect the traffic fine on the spot, present the offender with a box of cheeses and send him on his way. I suppose the unlucky family was consoling themselves with an ice cream at DeBorba's store on the corner of Grant Avenue and Redwood Highway while Dad was "taking care of business."

The cheese factory, like the shotgun justice it represented, has faded into the history of Novato.

