# The Novato Historian

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Preserving Novato History

# **Feature Section**

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### The Novato Historian

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# Clarkson's

March 29, 1972 A Lifetime Is Auctioned Off By ALICE YARISH

It was the night of December 7, 1954, the 13th anniversary of Pearl Harbor. The lights in the Community House were blazing away, people were chatting and laughing; Leo Mindling and Dick Lewis were tending bar, as the hour of seven drew near. Ladies were setting out a potluck dinner in the main hall, salads and desserts on one side, hot casseroles on the other. The long tables were draped with white cloths, and at the head table was a huge "sheet cake," topped by a frosting sailing ship. Next to the cake was a box of orchids.

Suddenly someone called out, "Here they come!" and in through the front door, dressed in their best, came two of Novato's favorite people, Captain and Mrs. Charles Clarkson. It was Cap's 70th birthday and a broad cross section of the people of the community (Novato was not yet a city) had arranged a big surprise shindig by which to express their warm affection for the colorful, crusty, ex-sea captain who had impressed his jolly wit, his generosity and civic responsibility, his forthright, often blunt, honesty on every heart.

## 200 Attend

More than 200 souls had assembled. Speeches were made, gifts were presented, and a hilarious spoof of the popular TV show, "This Is Your Life" was staged with Marett Boissevain as



Charles 70th birthday party on December 7, 1954

the masked witch doctor who delivered the baby Charles in South Africa on December 7, 1884. A highlight of the evening were verses written about her husband by Mrs. Clarkson who was in on the secret arrangements for the party.

That was long ago—
17 years—and now
the hospitable
Clarkson home,
surrounded by
venerable trees, at
702 Wilson Avenue
has been sold to the
Jim Studleys, their
lifetime accumulation
of goods auctioned off



Wedding day October 2, 1916

except for a few treasures. The once energetic Cap, like old soldiers who never die, is fading in a "convalescent" home, and his lovely "Madame Queen," now 88, is moving with a few of her prized possessions into a Novato retirement home. It marks a new phase in the incredible romance which started in 1909 when young Charlie Clarkson, a sea faring man, met Miss Loretta (Retta) Bishop, a pretty and proper young lady, at a Russian River resort where both were vacationing. For seven years he pursued her (although he denies this—claims it was the other way around) calling her for dates every time his ship came to port. He courted her mostly by mail, from Japan, Shanghai, Sydney, the Suez and other exotic points.

#### **Embarrassment**

And having sworn he would never marry, he found himself one bright day standing at the altar of the Alameda Congregational Church, Retta by his side. He was so embarrassed at having deserted his oft-repeated vow of bachelorhood that he notified none of his friends of the wedding. But Miss Bishop's side of the aisle contained 375 of her close friends.

It was a good choice for both of them and they remained happy ever after, even after the sad accident which confined him to a wheelchair 11 years ago and finally to the hospital where he lives in the fading shadows of his memories.



Retta, Charles Clarkson and Hilda MacDonald June 1959

Cap was born in Bloemhof, Transvaal, South Africa, where his father was a rancher and operated a salt mine. The family returned to its native England in 1884 where the parents opened a spa in Askern, Yorkshire. Young Charles and his brother were sent to a Catholic boys' school in Bruges, Belgium, for several years, then continued their education in England. When Charles was 15, he sought to escape from the stern contractures of his father by going to sea. His father apprenticed him aboard a sailing ship for two years.

In 1901 his ship sailed through the Golden Gate and the young man went ashore on the Embarcadero. A few days later on a streetcar going to Golden Gate Park, he met a man named Tom Cross who took an immediate liking to the English lad and invited him to attend a family-picnic in the park.

Charlie accepted the invitation and since that day has maintained a close friendship with the Cross family and to Tom Cross stepson, Eugene MacDonald, formerly of Novato who now lives in Forestville.

San Francisco

Warmed by the welcome and encouragement of his newfound friends, the homesick sailor decided to jump ship and remain in San Francisco. He made his home with the Cross family while he sought work, almost immediately landing a job in a jam factory for \$1 a day and a shed in which to sleep. Next, he took a job in a grocery store for \$15 a month but decided to go back to sea where he could make \$30. When he informed his employer, he was quitting the grocery job, the man said, "Why didn't you tell me you wanted \$30?" Charlie retorted,

"If you thought I was worth \$30 why didn't you give it to me?"

He boarded the revenue cutter Bear in 1903 and sailed north to Point Barrow, Alaska (the revenue service was the forerunner of the U.S. Coast Guard). In 1906 he joined the merchant marine as quartermaster on the American Whaling Line. He visited his family in England in 1908, then joined the gold rush to Goldfield, Nevada, where gold mining was on the boom. After three months of unprofitable prospecting he returned to San Francisco,

took a number of sea trips, then settled down for a while as captain of the private yacht, Virginia, berthed at Belvedere and belonging to Edwin Newhall, grandfather of Scott Newhall, former editor of the Chronicle.

In 1911 he was third officer on the Leonidas, a supply ship for the U.S. Army and went to Cuba to participate in the raising of the S.S. Maine.

It was later that year that he vacationed at the Russian River and met Miss Bishop, a Michigan girl who was working at the Oakland post office.

#### **Novato Map**

Also, in 1911 while in Cuba, he was shown a map of a little farming settlement called Novato, California, where land was being subdivided in what was then the biggest apple orchard in the world. He bought 10 acres sight unseen for \$2500, selecting his site from-the map because a creek coursed the parcel. When a year or so later he came to Novato to see his land he was delighted with it, resolved to live on it and farm it someday.

Clarkson served as an officer in the U.S. Navy during World War I, ferrying troops and supplies across the Atlantic Ocean. He was discharged as a lieutenant commander at the war's end. In 1921 he and Retta moved to Novato, camping out under a huge oak tree on his land while he and Eugene MacDonald built the home. Then he planted 600 pear trees as pears were profitable in those days.

The Clarksons rented the house to Emily Lane who lived in it for 20 years, while they lived in Oregon and Washington.

He was appointed manager of the North Coast Stevedore Company in 1922; moved to Vancouver in 1926 where he worked for the Board of Marine Underwriters until 1932. Then back to Seattle where he retired in 1945 with a \$10,000 bonus from his company. In 1945 they returned to Novato, expanded their home and later built a guest house next to the creek under an enormous bay tree and dubbed it "La Casa de Perro" or "the doghouse." There Captain Clarkson entertained his men friends at frequent poker parties for many years. In deference to Mrs. Clarkson, liquor was never served in the main house, and tippling guests were taken to the doghouse for the beforedinner drink. Cap was also a fine bridge player.

He continued to work as marine surveyor part time and on-call until a slipped disc and subsequent surgery on his back put an end to his activities.

#### **Civic Positions**

He had been an active golfer, shooting in the 80s even when he was in his 70's, and he was a vigorous and busy man. He served as treasurer of the Marin Farm Bureau for many years. He was a member of the boards of directors of Novato Community Inc., which owned the Community House, and the Novato Improvement Club, a social, cultural group. He appeared in a play with the Novato Little Theatre, joined the Great Books Group which discussed history, philosophy and literature. (He was a devotee of Mark Twain.)

For ten years he served as a member of the Marin County Personnel Commission. In 1956 he was county-wide co-chairman



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of the March of Dimes along with Carmel Taylor of Novato. Although the Clarksons had no children of their own (they raised four foster children) he headed a campaign committee in 1959 to pass a bond issue which would give Novato its first high school. A previous bond election had failed miserably, but under his hard-driving direction, the measure passed, giving the town its first, badly needed high school.

While he was doing all these things, "Madame Queen" devoted her efforts to church work. Several years ago, she and Cap sold five acres of their land to the Novato Presbyterian Church for half the value of the land. For this they were given a reception by the church whose grateful members have stood by with endless assistance to the aging couple, and now provide Mrs. Clarkson with transportation daily to visit her husband at the convalescent home.

#### **Charming As Ever**

Now 88, Mrs. Clarkson maintains her high spirits and good health, visits Cap daily, and keeps up her church work. This week she moved from her home with her remaining treasures, expressing gratitude for the happy and eventful life they both have led.

"I've never one had a headache in my life. I read without glasses and have all my own teeth," she boasts, charming as the day she met her young sailor at the Russian River.

# 

Ca 1975

The house was built in 1921 by Cap. Charles Clarkson. The original "house"

consisted of a living room and a bedroom upstairs. Cooking was done outside. This would be a tank house. The house was always called the "Old Tank House" by Cap. He purchased the land in 1911. He married Retta Bishop on October 2, 1916. When Cap was in the area he stayed at the house until 1925. He hired Charles Olsen to be the caretaker and Victor Bello to plow and Mr. Priest to prune. In 1925 Cap rented the ranch to Mrs. Emily Rogers Lane who lived there with her daughter Nell and son, D. Robert until 1945, when Cap and his wife moved in permanently.

The "Old Tank House" had wings added on it. Eugene R. MacDonald came to Novato in 1921. He did much of the carpentry on the house and became close friends of the Clarksons. What had been an attached garage on the right side of he house as you face it became a bedroom at Mrs. Lane's request. French doors replaced the garage doors. Model A's would barely fit into the garage and as cars got bigger no automobile would fit in. Emily owned a Model A with plate glass side windows and oval rear window made of plate glass. When the car would no longer run she made a "gazabo" out of it. The engine, fenders and wheels were removed. The front seat was turned to face the rear seat. She put a shingle roof on it and it became a fun place to sit, eat, read or just enjoy the garden. She finished the project by painting the "car" green.

While the Lanes lived in the house many changes were made with the approval of Cap. What is the kitchen today had been a very small bedroom for Roger. What had been the kitchen contained

practically no cupboard space so Lanes had a hoosier, a wheeled metal enameled cupboard with sugar and flour bins. The Lanes used the hoosier near the sink for convenience and it acted as a divider for the

"winter" dining room. The "summer" dining room was a back porch that had a view of Mt. Burdell. The area was so small that an old oak table, purchased from Eric Tainter, was cut in half so that one half could be nailed to the wall. It made a delightful eating, sewing and studying area during good weather. Eventually the original front porch of the "tank house" was incorporated into the house to make a larger living room. Mrs. Lane planted a "screen" of lilacs around the house. On the right side, next to what had been the garage, she planted a Tamarisk with its beautiful pink flowers. A creek flows through the backyard. She planted Maiden Hair fern on the bank of the creek which is still in existence.

Across the creek was property covered with poison oak. Mr. Maggetti (today Simolea ranch) was not allergic to poison oak so he agreed to clear it away and then build steps and paths so the Lanes could visit the Wilhelm Kock family who lived on the hill above the Clarkson property. Mr. Kock was a real estate salesman, well-known and highly respected in the community. He had on his property Novato's only orange grove. Emily dug a barbecue pit and covered it with a grate. Around the pit she placed cane seats from the 4-H railroad car that was located, for several years, behind the Presbyterian Church (today city hall, and before Trevitt Hall was built). Nel, Roger and their friends would have cookies and chocolate in the evenings around the fire. During World War II getting men to prune was difficult. Nell learned how from library books and from Mr. Priest. She knew how much the pear orchard (600 bartlett trees) meant to Cap. Clarkson so every effort was made to keep the orchard going. Lady friends of the Lanes would help pick the fruit, but the lug boxes were too heavy for them to lift. Nell could hear Mexican wetbacks singing in the evenings on the Maggetti property. She realized that there was a source of manpower. Using her limited knowledge of Mexican she bartered with the Mexicans and they agreed to load the truck that had been rented to take the fruit to a cannery.

In the early 1940's the Lanes still had only a wood stove for heating the house. There was gas in the kitchen. The gas stove had, as was then common, a trash burner. The burner was used to heat the pipes that would neat bath water. One

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had to time one's bath carefully.
In 1943 an oil burner was put into the living room. Since heat rises something had to be done to keep the heat downstairs until near bedtime. Emily created a trap door that would drop down to keep the heat downstairs. About a half hour before time for Nell and Roger to go to bed the "door" was lifted and hooked to stay open.

Mrs. Clarkson did not approve of alcohol in the house. She would not let Cap drink or entertain his friends in the hose. So, Cap built "Case de perro" (Dog House) to the right of a later built 2-car garage. In his private "casa" he entertained his many friends from his sailing days and from the Maritime Underwriters of San Francisco. There was room in the "casa" for a bed. Years later it was rented out. In 1972 Dr. and Mrs. James (Camie) Studly purchased the house. The "tank House" bedroom is Mrs. Studley's workroom for her "Bay Tree Farm" Easter -Christmas decorations business. The "Casa de Perro" is a store room.

By Michael Read

# Narrow Escape of Death

April 8, 1913 Tacoma

Freighter narrowly escaped disaster In one of the worst storms of the year, the British steamer Ikalis, with Capt. Clarkson left October 15, 1912 for Australia from Victoria, B.C. When the steamer ran into a terrific gale off the Oregon coast. He lost her deck cargo of lumber, was badly battered and finally limped into San Francisco. "None of us ever expected to see land again," said Capt. Clarkson, "and had the gale lasted a few hours longer the steamer would doubtless have foundered."

#### **Novato High School**

The school bonds for the new Novato school would go down to defeat in June 1954. Charles Clarkson would welcome the campaign chairman for the school

bond in December 1954. Dec. 2, 1954 IJ— "Paradoxical though it may seem, Novato taxpayers will save thousands of dollars annually by building their own high school rather than continuing to send their children on a rental and tuition basis to other high schools, according to Capt. Charles Clarkson, campaign chairman for the school bond election scheduled Dec. 14. Dec 14, 1954 the three bonds would pass by a 5-1 majority.

The Clarkson's would campaign against the city of Novato being incorporated in 1960.

"Cap" would die on April 16, 1972 at the age of 87. Weakened by his long illness, he caught pneumonia.

Retta would die on May 7, 1977 at the age of 93. She died in a local convalescent hospital after a lengthy illness.



Mrs. Charles Clarkson (center) serving tea at the annual silver tea held at her home since 1953.

Retta Clarkson's silver tea, which raised money for the Novato Presbyterian Church. This was the last silver tea. The tea was held at the church. Retta who was 91 at the this time was in a convalescent home was recovering from a hip injury. The Rev. Donald Rayment, pastor, chats with her.