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 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 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.

(Continued on page 2)
“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 Steamship 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 tipping guests were taken to the doghouse for the before-dinner 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 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 of the land he was delighted with it, resolved to live on it and farm it someday.

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Now 88, Mrs. Clarkson maintains her
transportation daily to visit her husband
and now provide Mrs. Clarkson with
endless assistance to the aging couple,
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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.

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Memories of Nell Lane Miller
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 the 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 heat 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 II—

“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.

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.

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