

ALPINE HISTORICAL SOCIETY
VOICES OF ALPINE SERIES
TOM HILL (with Tom's wife, Ann Hill)

NARRATED BY VIKKI COFFEY – NOVEMBER 2, 2002
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Vikki: How are you doing today?

Tom: Pretty good.

Vikki: Um. When did you first come to Alpine?

Tom: 1927. We bought 40 acres and we built a house. I got to watch the house being built.

Vikki: How old were you?

Tom: I was about five.

Vikki: So you got to watch it all. Did you take part in the building?

Tom: Yes. The only reason we came here was that I had asthma real bad and my Dad took a year off from his business and looked at all the places where the weather was good. He looked at Arizona and San Diego to find a place where I could breathe. And at that time there was a Veteran's Hospital in Alpine just past Alpine on the side of the road where the trailer park is [2400 Alpine Boulevard]. It was a two story building. And, they had a big sign coming into Alpine that said, "Best Climate in the USA".

Vikki: And, was it?

Tom: It sure was. The pollen count was low and over the years it changed. The hospital catered to the soldiers who had been gassed in the war.

Vikki: OK. World War I. So they had them here because of the good air?

Tom: Yes.

Vikki: How did Alpine look in general when you first moved here? What did Alpine Blvd. look like?

Tom: There was the Alpine Store. And my Dad, he built his house [on Robles Grande Road off of Tavern Road] and stuff. They had the Alpine Garage which is now the mercantile. A big round house and a repair garage and tow trucks and everything. There were no trees. We planted hundreds of trees on our property.

Vikki: What kind of trees did you have?

Tom: Oh, apricots and peaches and plums and many varieties of citrus trees. 200 trees in all.

Vikki: How did you get enough water here to take care of the trees?

Tom: Well, we all had big wells. We never did hurt too much for water. We had enough to water the orange trees and stuff and the rains took care of the others.

Vikki: In 1936 – 1940 there was a huge drought. How did the trees fare through that drought?

Tom: They were pretty bad. It was so bad that the peach trees never did even get any leaves. We had enough water for the orange trees. We had a reservoir.

Vikki: You had a reservoir?

Tom: Yes. It was at the highest point of the ranch.

Vikki: Oh. So, did you pump the well water out of the well into the reservoir?

Tom: Yes.

Vikki: How did irrigate from the well? Did you carry the water?

Tom: Oh, no. We had a big pipe—a three inch pipe that we bought from Yellowstone. They were experimenting with something and they had these large pipes and they were drilling for the geysers. They had a lot of pipe left over from Yellowstone and my dad bought it. It was used but it did the job. We had branch lines off of the main pipe to irrigate.

Vikki: Was the fruit a major part of your family's income?

Tom: It was supposed to be, but it never did pay enough to live on. Just because of the water. The garage and service station were the major income for the family.

Vikki: Down there in Alpine, you mentioned the store which I've heard a lot about. It's a huge part of Alpine history. What went on in the store? Was that like the cultural club?

Tom: The post office was inside the building. I remember my folks talking about this. C. V. Hilton and his wife they ran the store and it was the only store. It was kind of long and one wall had shelves on it for the canned goods and stuff. They had a cellar for storage where they stored stuff. In this one case my Dad told me the Hiltons had a lot of people that didn't have any money to pay. In one case, the wife was waiting on the person and she said, "CV—how much is this?" And he asked who it was. They had different prices for different people depending upon how much they could pay.

Vikki: Sounds like he was an interesting guy. Was this the kind of store that kids hung out at? Like a candy store?

Tom: It had everything that you would want to buy.

Vikki: Did they have furniture and big stuff like that?

Tom: Oh, no.

Vikki: Clothing?

Tom: Yes. And the same building had a restaurant in it.

Vikki: Was that the famous restaurant with the tree in it?

Tom: No. That was across the street. This one was east of it and you could go into the restaurant and store and post office.

Vikki: Is that building gone?

Tom: It burned down?

Vikki: When did that happen? It must have been tragic for Alpine.

Tom: Well, there was another store. Where the Alpine Inn is now.

Vikki: Now, the Veteran's Hospital was down there. Anything else that made up the town center?

Tom: Across the street was another store and I don't remember anything else. Soon after the store burned down there was another one there.

Vikki: What was the road like then? It wasn't even called Alpine Boulevard.

Tom: Well, this is all a clay area and in winter time they couldn't even get out of the place. They had to go to buy groceries on horseback because the wheels of a wagon or car would get stuck in the mud and clay.

Vikki: I heard horseback riding was the most popular means of transportation for kids around here for a long time.

Tom: Yes. A lot of people rode horses. I lived close enough that I walked to school, but sometimes I rode my horse [per Ann Hill].

Vikki: Where was the school?

Tom: This side of the highway where they park all the buses. That's where the school was.

Vikki: When you started school, was it still just a one room school? You must have started at the first grade?

Tom: Yes.

Vikki: Did you go to kindergarten there?

Tom: No. We lived in San Diego for a while and I went to kindergarten there.

Vikki: What was school like then? What was it like in first grade?

Tom: It had windows on the north side and then there were benches to sit on. And little windows without glass up at the top. I remember that because the birds would fly in and build nests. One built a nest up right on the top of the clock. Mrs. Hohanshelt wouldn't kick them out, she'd let us watch them.

Vikki: What a great lesson. Was Mrs. Hohanshelt your first teacher?

Tom: Yes.

Vikki: How many years?

Tom: Until I finished school.

Vikki: You were there when they combined schools?

Tom: Yes. The Indians came down. I remember when the Indians first came they were from the reservation.

Vikki: OK. And this guy is you?

Tom: Yes. (Tom tells names of students in photo; however, all names are not clear). Roy Williams, Joe Flegal, Betty Noble, Mary Gibson.....

Vikki: Did you play in the famous harmonica band?

Tom: Yes.

Vikki: What was that like?

Tom: It was fine.

Vikki: How did Mrs. Hohanshelt get you all to learn to play the harmonica?

Tom: She made it interesting and we learned to play. We played for radio stations and it was fun.

Vikki: Have you ever heard a recording of the band when you were on the radio?

Tom: No.

Vikki: That's too bad. I know that the classes were very small. Did you really only have five kids in your class?

Tom: Well, later on there were 28 kids. The older ones would help the younger ones. Sometimes retired school people would come and we'd take singing lessons from them and they'd help in other ways too.

Vikki: But otherwise, she did everything. This small class would make for a very close bunch of kids. Do you still see any of your classmates?

Tom: Yes. I see Joe Flegal and Roy Williams. We get together down at Mary Etta's in Flynn Springs. I don't remember all of them.

Vikki: Maybe they were a little older than you. Because they were different aged kids.

Tom: Gene and Dave Birshan and Craig. I don't know. Mary. Gibson, I guess. Unintelligible.

Vikki: Someone named Claude. I don't remember his last name [Bailey], but Carmen Lewis was his mom. Do you remember Claude? [Claude Bailey was much younger than Tom. Claude used to watch the teenagers in Bailey's Restaurant and he wished he was old enough to participate in the fun. When he became a teenager, they no longer gathered at Bailey's.]

Tom: No. The school had a bell tower on top of the school.

Vikki: What happened to that school?

Tom: They dismantled it. The road that goes by the Alpine Inn at the top of it the lady that bought it made several rental houses out of it.

Vikki: She didn't buy it to preserve it, she bought it to rent it. What was the highest grade the Alpine School went to? [Discussion about lady's name: Marshall?]

Tom: Eighth grade.

Vikki: So then you had to go to high school?

Tom: Yes.

Vikki: Where did you go?

Tom: Grossmont. The first year, when I was a freshman at Grossmont they had a bus with seven people on it. They'd come to Alpine and then we'd go down to Johnstown and switch off and take a bigger bus to Grossmont.

Vikki: How long a trip was it in those days? They didn't have a freeway.

Tom: About 45 minutes.

Vikki: Oh, I see. How do you feel about this new high school they are talking about now?

Tom: I guess so [Ann said Tom wasn't in favor of anything that raised taxes].

Vikki: What was the church like in the 1930's?

Tom: The Community Church was here.

Vikki: Is that the same one that is right on Victoria?

Tom: Yes. It was right behind the Alpine store.

Vikki: Is it the same building or have they rebuilt it?

Tom: No. It got burned down one time.

[Ann Hill: Wasn't the Town Hall the original church?]

Vikki: Was the Town Hall the building that is now the Alpine Woman's Club?

Tom: Yes. I think the first church was burned

Vikki: So, I have heard that the social life in Alpine was centered around the church, the school and the store. Is that about right?

Tom: Well, they had a Woman's Club too.

Vikki: So, when you all got together as kids what did you do for fun?

Tom: Well, the kids whose parents had farms, went right to work as soon as they got home from school.

Vikki: Oh. Chores.

Tom: In the evenings we got to do homework and I had chores to do. At this time of years, there would be trees to clean and we'd work on that until supper time. We'd get time off sometimes, of course. The kids would come over to our place sometimes and swim in the reservoir. You had to know how to swim because it was six feet deep.

Vikki: What other kind of chores did you have to do?

Tom: Well, we had a couple of cows and two horses and I had to milk the cows and tend the horses. We had chickens and a garden. We had quite a bit of a garden. You would see some women who would buy a bunch of cans—well, that was taboo in our house. My mother canned everything from the garden. I took care of the garden.

Vikki: The weeding and the picking was all your responsibility?

Tom: We did it all by hand and then later on we did get a tractor. Of course, we still had our horses but I rode on the tractor when I was seven years old.

Vikki: How did you even reach the pedals?

Tom: Well, there were no rubber tires.

Vikki: Oh, those metal round wheels I saw?

Tom: Yes.

Vikki: It must have made for a bumpy ride.

Tom: It did. Especially with those disks—if you hit a rock. It was very rocky and it would go, “Bang, bang, bang.” You’d have to push the clutch in real quick.

Vikki: That’s amazing. Tell me about that restaurant with the tree that grew in it.

Tom: It was Foster’s. The Log Cabin.

Vikki: How come it had a tree growing in it?

Tom: Well, when they first opened they had an old streetcar and they sat it there. The tree was outside of the streetcar. And, over the years they expanded and the tree grew right through the roof.

Vikki: So they didn’t want to cut the tree down. That sounds like fun. So, it sounds like Alpiners was pretty self sufficient. Did the restaurant thrive because of tourists or was it a place to go on Saturday and Sunday or what?

Tom: Well, then Highway 80 was the main drag through San Diego and due east. The Alpine Tavern on Tavern Road, on the left side, there was a two story building and I think they had a restaurant in there and, in the early days, the stagecoach came in there and that’s where the people had lunch or whatever the time they came. When I was in school whenever mother couldn’t make my lunch for some reason or other, she’d give me a quarter and I got to go over to the Alpine Tavern and Mrs. Dowd, she was a nice lady, would make me a couple nice sandwiches and fruit and stuff. Mother didn’t ever use mayonnaise; she used butter from the cows, so it was a real treat when Mrs. Dowd made a sandwich because she used mayonnaise. That was a real treat to get mayonnaise spread on a sandwich.

Vikki: Mrs. Dowd’s name came up a lot. Seems like a lot of people talk about her. What was she like?

Tom: Well, she was just a motherly type. She had people that rented a room from her. She had a bed and breakfast and she had several people stay there. People could come and spend a weekend there.

Vikki: Did they come up here for the air?

Tom: I think so.

Vikki: The kids liked her. What happened to that place?

Tom: Well, it burned down and they never rebuilt it.

Vikki: Do you remember the gorilla?

Tom: Yes. It was very late in the years.

Vikki: The end of the '40's or something like that. When did the Log Cabin close down?

Tom: I was gone during the war, I was gone off and on about three years [per Ann Hill—Tom joined the Merchant Marine and served during World War II. He enlisted in San Diego, trained at Catalina, served in Hawaii and the Pacific area. His father was a Navy man and told Tom to go into the Merchant Marine rather than the Navy as there was better food and he could get out at any time.]. Everything changed. I came back and the population really grew after that and several people moved out. It changed. I don't remember when the restaurant closed down.

Vikki: Where did you meet your wife?

Tom: First one or second one?

Vikki: Both. You tell either story you want.

Tom: 15 years ago. [Ann: 18 years ago. Laughter.]

Vikki: Now, she's telling me she's not an Alpine old timer.

[Ann: We met through a motorcycle club that we both belonged to.]

Vikki: Oh, how fun. That's fun. Do you still ride a motorcycle?

Tom: No. Not anymore. I'm almost 80 years old. We do a lot of camping, though.

Vikki: How did you meet Neda?

Tom: I lived on the ranch. My Dad had a truck and it had all kinds of tools and was a traveling machine shop. He'd fix refrigeration and go from house to house. But, anyway, I had a truck and when I came home from the Merchant Marine I had saved all my money and I bought a new truck. Neda worked at the McCall property and she took me over there. We got married in about 1951. [Per Ann Hill: Neda was riding her horse on Tavern Road, and Tom chased her in the truck and made her angry. She stopped and yelled at him and the relationship took off from there. She worked as a nanny and housekeeper at the McCall Ranch.]

Vikki: Do you remember anything about when Alpine couldn't get city water and people were fighting over that?

Tom: Yes. It happened. There were two outfits and one real estate man who had property over on Deer Flats; do you know where that is? Over by Highway 94. And he wanted to bring water up and take it through over there. We all had to pay on this thing to get water. A group of business men got together and realized that to bring water up here that guy was trying to pull a fast one on us. So they had business people and court people up here to investigate. And then they okayed it for just Alpine. There wasn't a real lawsuit, they just investigated. They had a parade in Alpine in connection with the water. My Dad had a bunch of bricks and he painted them gold. Called it gold bricking in relation to this water thing. I don't remember the details exactly.

Vikki: I understand that water finally came here—pretty late—1960 or something.

Tom: It helped the real estate people when water came. And the highway helped too.

Vikki: Where was your family's fruit ranch?

Tom: Robles Grande Road. Right down here—right past the school and to the left.

Vikki: Is that mostly developed now—houses and stuff?

Tom: It's pretty well developed now.

Ann: The original house is still there.

Vikki: Oh.

Ann: It's been added to and remodeled.

Tom: It's been remodeled and stuff, though.

Vikki: You told me about the Log Cabin. Do you remember much about the Willows?

Tom: Yes. The Willows. They had kind of a bed and breakfast up there too. They had cottages and Betty Noble's aunt ran it with Betty's mother. It was a nice place with cottages along the highway. The highway took it out when it came through.

Vikki: When was Highway 80 built? Was it built when you first came here?

Tom: The first one? Oh, yes it was.

Vikki: Was it a concrete road?

Tom: Yes, it was.

Vikki: Transportation between here and San Diego is a lot better than it was. About how long a trip was it when you were young to go to San Diego?

Tom: From Alpine, we figured on about an hour to get to San Diego.

Vikki: But that was not when it was a dirt road. You don't remember when it was a dirt road? It took about three days then to get to San Diego.

Tom: That was in the horse and buggy days. The Indians would come around all the time with horse and buggies. There reservation is down in the El Capitan Lake area and the city traded the Indians for that land for the reservation. It used to be Baron Long's horse ranch [Baron Long raised thoroughbred horses].

Vikki: Well, that must have been fun to see. Were they beautiful?

Tom: Yes they were.

Vikki: So, the government bought Baron Long's ranch and then traded it with the Indians for the land by El Capitan?

Tom: I don't think the Indians had much to say about it.

Vikki: Was it before the war or after the war?

Tom: Before the war. Way before the war.

Vikki: So the Indians didn't have a choice?

Tom: They were just told. It turned out pretty good for them. At the time they didn't know it. Some of them built houses on the land and there are homes out there on the reservation. There were houses out there before it was turned over to the reservation.

Vikki: When they bought that area did the government pay for the houses too?

Tom: Mrs. Hohanshelt and her husband lived on the reservation. She was renting from the horse ranch.

Vikki: What happened to her? Did she just have to move?

Tom: Yes. They built a house on South Grade Road and they sold that and built another house.

Vikki: One of the things I remember about old Alpine is that there were milk deliveries. Do you remember anything about the dairy?

Tom: Well, we had our own dairy. It was the Willows dairy. Betty Noble's uncle. Sometimes you had to buy the glass bottles and my dad would take one on the field and put an H on it and sometimes they would go away and you'd have to trade two bottles for one of his bottles.

Vikki: Why?

Tom: In other words, he'd get two bottles for one of our bottles. His customers would trade bottles. That was kind of weird. There was my dad's uncle. The family was from Texas. There were two families. Williams was the in-laws. Some of them dropped off in Arizona. My grandmother was born in Phoenix. She was supposedly the first white woman born in Arizona. The family came across the desert and came to San Diego. They needed water and the Indians were trying to run them off. No one was killed or anything, but they didn't get the water and were trying to get to San Diego. My uncle, Kino Wilson, was a Texas Ranger...he became a US Marshall in San Diego. He was a Texan and he taught me how to shoot and stuff. He died of cancer.

Vikki: He was the police chief in San Diego?

Tom: Yes.

Vikki: Was that in the 30s?

Tom: No, that was before the 30s. He was a Marshall after that.

Vikki: Now, I have one more question which may be a little hard. When I work at the museum they can't find a cabin anywhere. Where was it?

Tom/Ann: It was at the end of Tavern Road and Arnold Way.

Vikki: OK. It's not the one that's there now. It's not the store?

Tom: It burned down.

Vikki: OK. People. Recollections of people. I have some names here and if you can tell me a little about them. You told me about Hazel, but what about her husband Forest?

Tom: Oh, he was a young man. In those days, if you had a forest fire and you came along, they would stop you and make you fight the fire. Fighting fire then was with a shovel and beat the weeds down. The hot air and heat you needed to be very strong. He got a contractor's license he was a good builder. [Per Ann Hill: Forest Hohanshelt found fires in Alpine and his lungs were severely damaged from inhaling the smoke. He never recovered completely from this and had health problems the remaining years of his life.]

Vikki: He had a lot to do with the kids too, didn't he?

Tom: Not really.

Ann: Did you know Hazel had a dog?

Tom: She brought him in front of the room and she said, "Lay down, Patches." The rest of us would say, "Lie down." [Per Ann Hill: When Mrs. Hohanshelt would say, "Lay down, Patches," the dog would just look at her. The children would then chant, "Lie down, Patches," and the dog would immediately do so. It was a grammar lesson.]

Vikki: She was a very good teacher.

Tom: I give her a lot of credit. She would be out there on the playground with us. She always had a Christmas program at the Alpine Woman's Club and did skits on the stage.

Vikki: When you have one person as a teacher for so many years you learn a lot from them and that must be a very special person.

Ann: Tom's son had her as a teacher too.

Tom: She outlived Chuck, my son. He worked in construction.

Vikki: I'm sorry to hear that. Speaking of teachers. There's another name. Who was Joan MacQueen?

Tom: There's a Joan MacQueen school down in Harbison Canyon and they're all under the Alpine School District.

Ann: She was the principal of the middle school and she died of cancer. They loved her so much that they named the school after her.

Vikki: Bea La Force. Did you ever meet her?

Tom: Yes. My sister was a horsewoman and when she was about 18 she used to work for Mrs. LaForce and her husband. They had horses. She used to work for Lazy A Ranch.

Vikki: She was the librarian for a time?

Tom: I don't think so. She worked with the library. She published her book. She helped a lot. She was with the Alpine Players and was active.

Vikki: Tell me about the Alpine Players. That's one I haven't heard about.

Ann/Tom: Was it high school kids basically? No, it was others.

Vikki: What did they perform?

Tom: They performed for about seven years.

Vikki: What was the play you were in?

Tom: I have no idea [Ann Hill does not believe that Tom was in any plays—she said he was far too shy].

Vikki: That brings me to the next name. The Heyser's. Did you know them?

Tom: Yes. In fact, the Heyser's father owned the Log Cabin at one time.

Vikki: The last one on my list is Betty Noble.

Tom: I think she was a year ahead of me. Betty could play baseball or anything else. She was a good athlete and then she went into the Marines.

Vikki: That must have been usual. She is very proud of that.

Tom: Yes.

Vikki: How did Alpine welcome back all the boys who came back from the war?

Tom: I don't remember. There were all kinds of old cars in the parking lot. I remember the black outs. One phone call I got there were submarines coming up. Somebody was really drunk.

Vikki: If you trace your time here in Alpine, do you feel that it was at the end of the war that changed the place from a sleepy village into a town?

Tom: Yes. Lots of real estate people came in and then the highway came through.

Vikki: When did Interstate 8 go in?

Tom: Highway 80 was the first one.

Ann: Tom worked on Interstate 8. We used to ride our motorcycles through Pine Valley when it wasn't the interstate.

Vikki: To finish out here, what do you think of Alpine today and where do you think it's going?

Tom: I think it's going to keep growing. I like Alpine. If you lived on this road, there is constant cars going each way all the time—you can't get across the road. People that owned the ground, I don't blame them for wanting to sell parts of their land and make some money. Everyone who lives in California is kind of a real estate person anyway. I think the first property my dad sold; he sold about 10 acres for \$1,400 an acre and look at what it would bring now, a couple hundred thousand.

Vikki: I thank you very much for your time. I love to hear people talk and learn things about them.

Miscellaneous information from Ann Hill – August 23, 2013:

Tom was born in 1922; died in 2009 in Alpine.

Hill home, where Tom was raised, was located on Robles Grande Road in Alpine, off of Tavern Road. The house was still standing when Tom died. After Tom's father died, his mother had no income and sold the 40-acres off in 10-acre increments. When she sold the last 10-acre plot, along with the family home, she bought a small home on White Oak Drive a few doors from Tom Junior's home.

Tom's father built the first school bus used by the Alpine School District.

Tom's father ran the Alpine Garage in order to supplement their income when fruit orchard failed to provide enough income for the family.

Tom was a student in Hazel Hohanshelt's class the first year she taught. In later years, when she came across Tom, she would hug him and say, "My very first student—Tom." That always pleased Tom.

Mrs. Pratt, wife of the Coca Cola distributor who lived in Alpine and was very wealthy, gave Tootsie Hill (Tom's sister) a black and white pinto horse. There is a black and white framed photo of Tootsie on the pinto, with a beautiful silver saddle, that Ann donated to the Alpine Historical Society some years ago.

Tom had his house built in 1964. Their contractor was Joan Manuele's father. Tom did the grading and the foundation work on the house and Joan Manuele's father started the house; however, he died of a heart attack before work was completed. His son and Tom finished the house together.

Flora Hill (Tom's mother) served for a time as the President of the Woman's Club. She was a fantastic cook—known as one of the best cooks in Alpine. She was of German descent and took music lessons in Germany.

Tom's uncle Keno Wilson was the police chief in San Diego from 1909 to 1917. He also served as a Federal Marshall. Tom often laughed that his uncle almost killed him when he was a teenager. Apparently Tom had his head under the hood of his uncle's truck. Keno honked the truck's horn, and Tom was so startled he hit his head hard on the hood.

Tom's son Chuck was killed in 1999 in a construction accident. He had volunteered to work on a Saturday even though he was scheduled to be off. Chuck was a heavy equipment operator. One of the large pieces of equipment went over a bank and down a steep slope. He was asked to help right it and pull it up the embankment. He was in a pickup truck with two of the other workers—one the son of the company owner—they were pulling the piece of equipment up the embankment when the truck hit the side and went out of control. Chuck, a very large and strong

man, held both of the other workers firmly in order to protect them from the impact. He was the only one of the three killed in this accident and was called a hero by everyone. The union was closed the day of his funeral. Chuck died in 1999 at the age of 48. Ann and Tom were vacationing at the time of the accident and happened to call a relative when they learned the terrible news. Ann says Tom never really got over this tragedy.