

Swiss Immigrant's Dream Realized in Hardwork & Faith

By WILLIAM (Bill) HILFIKER
John Hilfiker's grandson

John Hilfiker was born in 1857 in Switzerland and raised on the family farm near Kolliken, Switzerland. He came to Humboldt County on his second trip to America in 1884. After crossing the United States, he arrived in San Francisco, California where he booked passage on a ship to Portland, Oregon. He intended to visit Jake Luscher and Henry Scholer, friends of the family, who had farms on the Columbia River.

One of the ports of call on the way to Portland was Humboldt. He liked the looks of Humboldt County so well he got off the ship and made Humboldt County his home. Soon after arriving in Eureka, Hilfiker got the job of managing Captain H.H. Buhne's Ranch at Spruce Point. It was a large ranch running from the flat on the bay below Buhne's Point which was the site of Humboldt City, the first community established on

Humboldt Bay and extended over the top of Humboldt Hill. The ranch building were located near the present site of the Seaview Manor Convalescent Hospital.

When Hilfiker took over the management of the ranch, Humboldt City was abandoned, he looked upon the tumbled down remains of it as a hangout for tramps and hobos and had it burned and reconverted the land into pasture. The bay has since washed away the flats where Humboldt City stood along with much of Buhne's Point, so there is nothing remaining of the first town of Humboldt Bay.

The Buhne Ranch was mainly a dairy ranch, but it had to be self sufficient and it took many hired hands to run the ranch without any type of power except horses and manual labor. The ranch had a bunk house and cookhouse for the men.



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They shipped milk to Eureka, butter to San Francisco, and fed the skim milk to hogs.

On the ranch, Hilfiker met his future father-in-law, Henning Seemann, who worked as a cooper, making the barrels the butter was packed and shipped in.

Hilfiker was looking for a cook and Seemann said his daughter, Christine was cooking in San Francisco and didn't care for it there. Seemann sent for her and Hilfiker liked the new cook so well he married her in 1890. They had two children born on the ranch: John Henry, 1891 and Christine Sophie, 1892. The children would ride the milk wagon to the Bucksport school at Spruce Point in the morning and walk back to the ranch in the afternoon.

Indians were welcome on the ranch. Many years earlier they had saved Captain Buhne's life on the bay and he gave instructions to feed them whenever they came up to the place, although he wouldn't allow them to eat in the house.

One of Humboldt County's first telephones was on the ranch which Buhne would use to get reports on the weather at Humboldt Bar and check to see if any ships were in sight. This information was important to him because he was the Bar Pilot.

Hilfiker and his family moved off the ranch into Eureka about 1899 to a home he had built on Searles Street. There, he reclaimed some swampy tideland for a truck garden, by building a dike and raising the bottom land in the gulch near his home. This was done by first driving wooden pickets into the mud forming a wooden fence around the lower edge of the property. Then he ditched inside, shoveling the mud against the fence forming a dike. At the lower end he built a wooden outlet pipe and flood gate and then he raised the low



This is John Hilfiker's family. Back row, left to right, John, Sr., John Henry Hilfiker. Front row, Harold Otto, Christine Charlotte, Christine Sophie and Ruth Susan. This photograph was taken in 1910.

The HILFIKER STORY

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land by digging a trench, which he filled with clay from a nearby bank. After the trench was filled he dug another trench next to the one he had filled placing the good bottom soil on top of the clay. Hilfiker patiently repeated the process until the entire garden plot was raised above the water table. He had a delivery route around town selling the produce and it was also sold in the local stores. The garden grew exceptionally good celery that was shipped as far as Portland, Oregon.

The Hilfikers had two more children born at Searles Street: Ruth Susan in 1900 and Harold Otto, 1902. In 1902 they moved to Tydd Street, quit gardening commercially and entered into a partnership with Charles Pickett, digging wells. In addition to his partnership with Pickett, Hilfiker made concrete well casings at his home on Tydd Street. He mixed the concrete by shovel and hand-tamped it into wooden molds that he had made himself. In addition to this he made burial vaults for the nearby Myrtle Grove Cemetery. He purchased his cement from the D.C. McDonald Company, who had it shipped in by boat.

The gravel came from the beach at Bucksport near the mouth of Elk River. At that time, the mouth of Elk River was much further south than it is today, going straight into the bay where the railroad now crosses Elk River. The gravel was hauled by two horse teams in "stick" wagons. A stick wagon had 2 x 4 sticks for a bottom, the sticks could be rotated 90 degrees which allowed the gravel to fall out of the bottom of the wagon. The wagons could haul two yards on the road, but the teams could only pull the weight of one yard on the soft sand at the beach. The teamster had to go out at low tide, find the gravel that was deposited in shallow pockets by the waves. He would count the shovelfuls to know when a yard was on the wagon and then he would take it out to the road, dump and return for the second yard. Upon returning back to the road with the second yard of gravel he would reshovel the first yard that was dumped, back onto the wagon and head for town. Two yards of gravel was a days work for the man and his team of horses. At this time all the gravel used in Eureka came from the beach at Bucksport.

About 1908, Hilfiker moved his pipe operation to Bucksport where he rented a shed at Press Shingle Mill. This was at

the site of the present Oil Terminal Company.

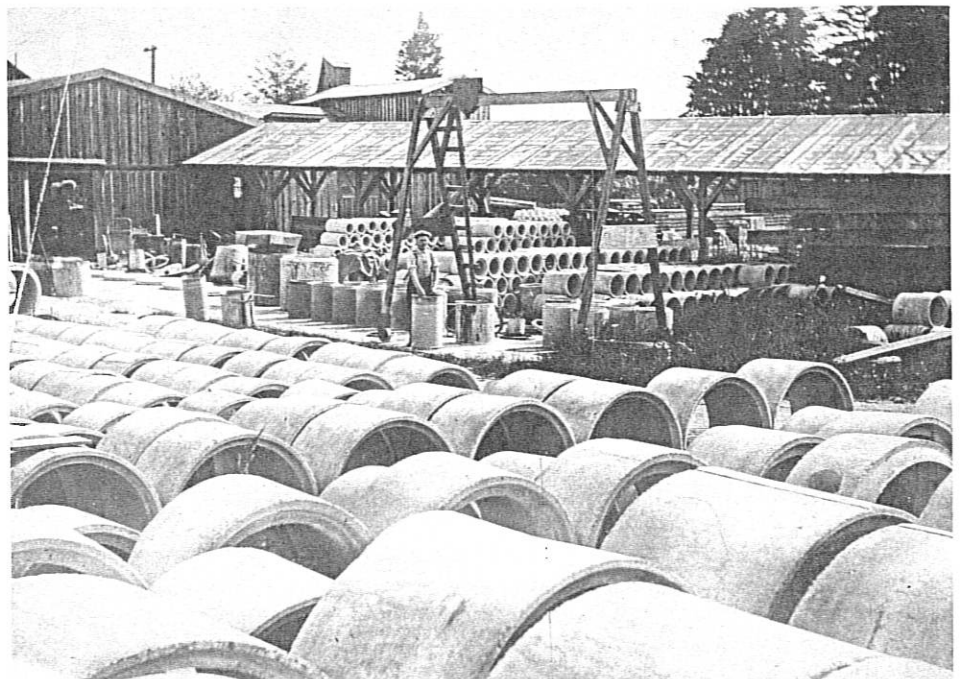
Bucksport had many advantages: He could commute to work on the street car. There was a Dolbeer-Carson railroad spur which connected with the Northwestern Pacific Railroad at Elk River, so he could ship his pipe by rail, and, he was near to the beach that supplied the gravel for his concrete. He still made pipe the hard way, without the aid of mechanical power, and he made most of his own tools, forms, even the wheelbarrows.

Hilfiker would use the gravel as it came from the beach including the clam shells for his aggregates. The concrete was mixed on a mixing platform. To measure the amount of aggregates, two men would shovel gravel into a bottomless box that was placed on one side of the platform, the box was then removed, cement was placed on top from cloth sacks which were carefully saved to return for the deposit on the sacks. The men then faced each other from opposite sides of the pile of cement and aggregates and shoveled the pile to the other side of the platform. After they had shoveled the cement and aggregates four times back and forth they would add water into a depression they had made in the center of the pile, when the water soaked into the concrete, the men would again shovel it back and forth about four more times. They would add any addi-

tional water needed to the mix from a sprinkling can. The wet concrete would then be shoveled into a wheelbarrow and moved by hand to the pipe mold. The molds had a cast iron base ring which formed the groove in the pipe. The inside core and outside jacket were made of steel. The core had a spider arrangement riveted to the inside in order to collapse it so that it could be removed from the newly made pipe. The mold was filled in layers by shovel and compacted with hand tampers, made from a piece of three-quarter inch steel pipe with cast iron tamper heads cast onto the ends at the Eureka Foundry--a small tamper head one on one end for small pipe and a large one on the other for the bigger pipe. They would place two 10 gauge wires in the pipe to help support it when the mold was stripped from the pipe and to help hold pipe together if it cracked when it was moved.

A second cast iron ring was pounded onto the top of the pipe with the tampers to form the tongue end of the joint. The form was then removed from the new pipe and the process repeated.

The next day the pipe was turned on its side with the help of a 4 x 4 timber. The bottom ring removed, and the pipe rolled to the curing yard where the pipe was sprinkled with water, to complete the concrete curing. The wall thickness was less than that used in modern pipe design because of the problems of handling the weight. The pipe had no effective reinforcing steel, yet, much of the pipe produced under those conditions are still in use today. (Continued, next page)



This photo shows part of the inventory of the Hilfiker concrete pipe in 1922. The man in the center of the photo is Rudolph Matter, John Hilfiker's nephew.

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Pickett and Hilfiker purchased a second well drilling machine from the Eureka Foundry Co. in May, 1910. It was powered by a 15 H.P. Atlas gasoline engine that turned 425 revolutions. They used this machine to do the test boring from the railroad bridge at South Fork. Shortly after this, the partners dissolved their partnership and Hilfiker concentrated on the concrete pipe plant.

In 1912, Hilfiker purchased property east of the railroad tracks on Fifth Street which is now Hilfiker Lane and moved the pipe plant. By 1916, he had a machine for making concrete drain-tile and a concrete mixer powered by a single electric motor driving a common jack shaft for all the equipment. The concrete tile machine manufactured thin walled pipe which made it necessary to screen the larger aggregates out of the gravel that came from the beach. This was done by shoveling the gravel against an inclined screen which allowed the sand and small aggregates to pass through. The large aggregates clam shells, etc., were saved to used in the large pipe which were still hand-made and rolled by hand into the storage yard; the pipe had to be rolled up planks onto the railroad cars or wagons for shipment.

In 1919, John Hilfiker suffered a stroke which made it difficult for him to operate the business which was by now producing roofing tile, drain tile, septic tanks, culvert pipe, hog troughs, precast stair steps, wash trays, concrete vases and flower boxes, well covers and curbing, chimney blocks, foundation piers, burial vaults and concrete lawn rollers.

June 5, 1921, Hilfiker's nephew, Rudolph Matter, came to Eureka from Switzerland. Matter worked in the concrete pipe plant and kept the books for Hilfiker. The pipe business from the start was seasonal, and employment would range from four men in the summer to only Rudolph Matter in the winter. The cement still came in cloth sacks from the D.C. McDonald Company and the gravel was purchased from the McLaughlin Bros., teamsters. They still picked up the gravel from the beach at Bucksport. The McLaughlin's worked together and double-teamed their wagons on the beach. Their four horses could pull a fully loaded wagon off the beach so that they didn't have to top the load off when they reached the solid road.

About 1924, Rudolph Sanchi built a bucket elevator and over head gravel

screening plant to separate the various sized aggregates, which were stored in overhead wooden bunkers. This system was much like modern plants, except there was no way of proportioning the aggregates and change them directly into the concrete mixer. They accomplished this by dumping the sand and gravel on the floor then counted the shovelfuls as they loaded the mixer by hand. Matter remembers Henry Jacobson as the best pipe-maker at the time. Hilfiker's son-in-law, Howard Soules, came to work at the pipe plant in the Spring of 1924 and took over the book-keeping when Rudolph Matter returned to Switzerland July 15th, 1925.

John Hilfiker sold the business to his son, Harold, in January of 1926. Even though partially paralyzed, the senior Hilfiker would walk all over town with the aid of a cane, visiting friends and relatives, and watch the company that he had founded grow with the leadership of his son, Harold.

In 1927, a machine was installed that could manufacture reinforced concrete pipe by the mechanical tamping process. Motor trucks replaced the teams. Specification aggregates were hauled from a screening plant on the Eel River first by rail then by truck. Cement was purchased by the rail-car rather than being shipped in by boat. There was a special "treat" when a rail carload of cement came in from the Mt. Diablo Cement Company near Walnut Creek. They would send a sack of walnuts in a small cement bag with every car load of cement.

Additional property was purchased and the manufacturing facilities were moved in 1939 to their present location at Broadway and Hilfiker Lane. One of the new products was concrete blocks which the building was made of.

John Hilfiker passed away in 1940. His life spanned from the early days of Humboldt when everything was done by hand and horsepower, and people had to be self-sufficient to the age of mechanization and its specialization that requires interdependence between people, companies and government.

Clarke Museum Draws Visitors On Reopening

By Coleen Kelley
Curator, Clarke Museum

After "time out" for a rest, house cleaning, with the presentation of attractive new displays, Clarke Museum reopened Tuesday, April 29 on its regular schedule, attracting in the first two weeks over 800 visitors, including names from as far away as New Zealand and France, and as near as just around the corner.

The response to the new displays has been fantastic, and we continue to get local visitors who have not been in the museum for years. They are surprised with the changes that have taken place and stop at the front door to gaze and exclaim: "I never realized how gorgeous this building was! What did you do that makes it look so different?"

The answer is in the "big change" to be found in exposing the colored glass skylight in the Clarke Hall (main hall), allowing light to come in from above. It was hidden by paint for years. Too, we have many plants and flowers inside the hall giving it the look of a greenhouse!

The museum will soon be accepting a permanent loan from Humboldt State University of an antique weapons collection. The assortment consists of 47 items: 14 rifles, 14 pistols; 19 accessories ranging from a home-made knife to three powder horns. A few of the rifles were made in Northern California.

The collection was given to Humboldt State many years ago by James Blake who came to Humboldt County in the early 1900's and lived near Arcata. The weapons have been cared for by the Humboldt State University Foundation in the past, and will be turned over to the museum within the month. The items will be catalogued by the museum and displayed during the summer.

We urge all Humboldt County Historical Society members to visit the museum; to see the new displays and to visit with our docents. They will find the Native American displays in the Nealis Hall a rare treat.

We urge readers to bring summer travelers and friends to the museum to show them our real heritage. Admission is always free.

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