

The Heaney Family and the Vigilantes of Sonoma County - 1935
By Paul Council

I began my genealogical explorations ten years ago, October 2011. Though my mother, Leona Marjorie Heaney, had shared a few stories from her childhood, she didn't know much about her family history, and I was anxious to learn more.

In these ten years I have made several interesting finds, but none more interesting than one made that very first month—about when Leona's family was confronted by vigilantes.



Michael Francis Heaney

My grandfather, Michael Francis Heaney, died young, age 52, in 1932, when Leona was 8 years, leaving my grandmother, Beulah Beatrice Heaney, with five children and a 10-acre chicken ranch in Sonoma County, seven miles southwest of Santa Rosa.

My first genealogical field trip was to the Sonoma County Library to see what I could find. What a find! One of the indexes cited my grandmother Beulah and Uncle Bill. I thought, wow, it's probably about him as a young boy in



Beulah Beatrice Heaney

school. So, I found and reviewed the book, and then historic editions of the Santa Rosa Press Democrat. I wasn't even close. Here is the story.



1935 Sonoma County Apple Orchard
Courtesy Western Sonoma County Historical Society

In the 1930's, Sonoma County had been a brewing hotspot of escalating strife between farm laborers and growers. It boiled over into violence in the summer of 1935, culminating in a particularly nasty incident the night of August 21-22, and my family got swept into that frightening night.

Politically, my grandparents leaned left, and they had long associated with labor organizers. After Michael's death, Beulah took on a boarder who was a labor organizer, Ed Wolff, and his wife.

The growers, local business leaders, the American Legion and the Sheriff joined in



Sheriff Harry Patteson
 Collaborated with Growers to
 Suppress Farm Labor
 Photo Courtesy Sonoma
 County Library

league to break the labor movement and organized a vigilante mob. A labor meeting was scheduled for August 21, 1935, and 300 vigilantes lay in wait. But the meeting organizers learned of the trap and called off the meeting. Undeterred, the vigilantes went looking for five of the organizers. One was Ed Wolff, my grandmother's boarder. The vigilantes split up and captured all five. The two main leaders, Jack Green and Sol Nitzberg, were taken after a brief gun battle and tear gas was lobbed into the Nitzberg home—with his wife and children present.

A group of the mob arrived at Beulah's home, broke in and dragged Wolff off to Santa Rosa. The five were beaten, then forced to kiss the American flag and swear to stop organizing. Three complied, but Green and Nitzberg refused. They were further beaten until finally complying. Green and Nitzberg were then tarred and feathered and dumped outside of town. My Uncle Bill, Aunt Bea and Wolff's wife went in search of Wolff. They found Green and Nitzberg, with a menacing mob nearby. They brought the injured men back to Beulah's house, then to their own homes. Wolff later made it safely back to the house.



Santa Rosa Press Democrat- August 22, 1935
 Courtesy Sonoma County History and Genealogy Library

What?!

A short time after I made this discovery, I visited my mother, told her the story, and asked, “Do you remember this?” She replied, “Oh, yes. Those vigilantes were so mean. I took my little brother Ed upstairs and we hid in a closet.” Later, I shared the story with several of my cousins. None had ever been told this story.

After my mother passed away in 2017, I found an old, yellowed copy of the December 1935 Western Farmer newspaper which included an eyewitness account of that night penned by my grandmother.

Below are excerpts from her harrowing first-hand account:



12-Year-Old Leona Heaney



Heaney Family Home- Sonoma County

“About two o’clock in the morning of Aug. 22nd, our sleep bound home was rudely awakened by the rumble and crunching of many cars and tramping feet... My eldest son was shaking my arm..., he whispered: “Vigilantes, Mom, the yard is full of men, Oh, Mom!” ... Dazedly I heard him say something about the guns being loaded by the younger brother... I refused to consider that we actually might need them to defend our home, but the pressure outside was growing closer. In desperation I thought that maybe we could bluff without killing, but the click of the shells into the magazine of the deer rifle was ominous and deadly... No, we must use our wits, upon my decision rested the fate of many lives...

I just clasped the hand of my eldest daughter. To the younger children I remembered murmuring that they should not be afraid, I would not let the intruders in. Somehow it had not occurred to me that my home might be entered against my wish... one becomes imbued with the notion that... the home was a sacred haven. But entrance was demanded, the door was struck a splintering blow and jerked open; my daughter and I faced the glare of the leering men. In a loud threatening manner they said that they had come for the individual rooming with us.

I demanded warrants. I ordered them off as trespassers.

They laid rough hands upon us. They threatened us with tear gas and lynching. Loudly they disclaimed the need for warrants, they stood for Americanism. Anger cleared my mind.

“Americanism?” what did they know about it? We held them off for about ten minutes, but by pressure of numbers they at last filed in. A sickening brutal crowd. They took their victim and

departed. They took more than a member of our household, they took our confidence and joy in the faith of our fellow men. They took our naïve acceptance of the heritage for which our fathers bled...

As I held my youngest on my lap, my heart grew sick within me at the picture he must carry...

The whole family has been robbed of security. Our livelihood has been grievously interfered with. We must even go without the necessities of life as we struggle up from under this..."

In 1936 the family moved to the safety of Oakland, where my mother graduated high school then joined the war effort as a welder in the shipyards—yes, a Rosie the Riveter! But that's another story...

