

TOOLIN' AROUND TOWN

Rancher Herb Burbank Jr. enjoys his 'Cats' and 'Birds'

On Herbert Burbank Jr.'s ranch, the wind blows quite often and sometimes the fog doesn't lift until lunchtime. But on clear mornings and on brilliant sunlit afternoons when visibility extends for miles from his hilltop ranch house, it feels like you can almost touch the



HARLAN OSBORNE

ocean, which as the crow flies is just four miles away over the coastal mountains. The high-perched home, located on 215 hilly acres rising above Two Rock Valley, has been in the Burbank family since 1922, the year Herb's parents, Herbert and Lillian (Watkins) Burbank, who worked as a nurse at St. Luke's Hospital in San Francisco, were married and decided to pull up roots

in nearby Tomales and establish a dairy just off Carmody Road.

The original house was very small, just a kitchen, bedroom and bathroom, but a two-story addition that included a family room and three more bedrooms was built by the time Herb Jr. was born in 1925 and his sister, Jean came along in 1928. A much larger living room with a fireplace and picture window was added later.

It's the only home Herb Burbank has ever known. As a kid he helped his father maintain the small dairy operation, milking the cows by hand and separating the cream which was brought to the Petaluma Cooperative Creamery once a week. As was often the case in those days, each cow had a name and on Burbank's place, Suzie, Spot, Red and Slowpoke roamed among the herd. Herb and his sister attended Bloomfield Grammar School and he was a 1943 graduate of Petaluma High.

They had about 90 acres set aside to grow oat hay and another 10 acres for potatoes, and with eight natural springs on the property water was plentiful. The hilly land "takes more work" than some and the potatoes had to be dug by hand, but "we didn't think anything of it," said Herb, although work became less tedious when they bought their first tractor. Upgrading to a Grade A dairy meant increasing the Jersey and Guernsey herd to about 120 cows.

Most of the potatoes they grew were of the Lake Rose and Red Rose variety. It's unclear why the family didn't grow the Russet Burbank potato developed by Herb's great-great-grand-uncle Luther Burbank, the widely regarded father of modern plant breeding who developed more than 800 new strains of fruits, vegetables, flowers and



PETALUMA ARGUS-COURIER AUG 26 2010

TERRY HANKINS/ARGUS-COURIER STAFF

Herb Burbank Jr. has a collection of Ford Thunderbirds and Caterpillar tractors.

grasses, including the Santa Rosa plum, Shasta Daisy and Freestone peach, and spent most of his working life in Santa Rosa, where his home is a National Historic Landmark.

In 1952, Herb married Petaluma girl Edna Mae Bahnsen, who had worked at Hunt & Behrens and Ascherman's Market. Together, they operated the ranch where Edna Mae pitched in and did everything, including tackling the tough physical chores and running the farm equipment. She passed away in 1987.

About 30 years ago, Herb retired from dairying and now leases his property to Don Moreda, who raises calves until they're old enough to milk. A large barn is rented to Petaluma Speedway race car driver "Ironman" Shawn McCoy, who uses it as his garage and workshop.

With his farming days behind him, Herb now



Herb Burbank Jr. holds his catch after a day of fishing in the mid-1920s

See, TOOLIN', page C4

Toolin'

Continued from page C1

spends more time with his collection of cats and birds, not the furry and feathered type, but the kinds with tracks and fins and dual exhaust.

His five "cats" are Caterpillar tractors, restored and repainted antique tracked earth-movers and dozers.

He belongs to the Antique Farm Equipment Club and a local Caterpillar Club whose members haul their aged machinery to Caterpillar shows and demonstrate them. His "bird" collection consists of

four 1957 Ford Thunderbirds, three of which are in showroom condition, including the raven black porthole hardtop he and his wife purchased new for \$3,740.

He's a lifetime member of Thunderbirds of Sonoma, a car club established in 1970 that's limited to owners of '55, '56, and '57 T-Birds.

(Harlan Osborne's column, Toolin' Around Town, appears every two weeks. Contact him at harlan@sonic.net)

