



INTERVIEW WITH DON CUNEO

By Charity Maness

Don Maddock Cuneo was born March 27, 1924, the fourth of five children born to Rose (Costa) and Vic Cuneo; Fred, Louise, Gladys, Don and Vern.

Don and his younger brother Vern were born at the family home next to the Costa building in the little town of Calaveritas. His older siblings, Fred, Louise and Gladys were born at Otis Ranch, a site near Fricot City. His own mother had also been born in Calaveritas while his father had been born in San Antone camp. With a bloodline heralding from Genoa Italy, the family's customs and traditions ran deep with the old country roots.

Vic was a jack of all trades, supporting his large family by mining at the Hearst Mine in Sheep Ranch until it closed in 1942 as well as farming. Vic also had a great passion for hunting. While Rose had her hands full at home with the five children.

Don's fondest memories of his childhood were hunting with his father, brother and friends.

"My dad took us hunting as soon as we could walk. I remember my little brother Vern killed his first deer when he was nine and I killed my first

when I was eleven. We loved hunting and fishing. We would hunt dove, pigeons, ducks, quail and deer. But deer hunting was my favorite. We lived on deer meat out there. I remember one time we went to check our trap line for coon or fox and we caught a skunk!" His father was left to deal with that particularly smelly catch.

As the boys got older they were allowed to hunt on their own. One trip the boys came home with two deer. "I got one and Vern got one, but when we got home he told our dad that there were three deer but we only got two."

Growing up he had spring water yet no indoor plumbing.

The residents of Calaveritas all had outdoor toilets each "with a Sears or a Montgomery Ward catalog in there," laughed Don.

Don attended the one room schoolhouse in Calaveritas for first through the fifth grade.

"There were a lot of kids when I started school in first grade. I remember the older kids would ride their horses to school. I thought that was pretty



Rose (Costa) Cuneo at the Cuneo home circa 1912 – photo courtesy Fritzi Cuneo Dorroh

good, all I had was a fishing pole and a gun, but they had horses.”

The school had no running water, no plumbing and one outhouse for both boys and girls.

“With no running water we would have to go to the spring to get a bucket each morning. The water was so good, but it was scarce so we had to watch our water use.”

In the fifth grade the amount of students had dwindled from fifteen when he was in first grade to four but the school received a new teacher; Mrs. Royston.

According to Don, Mrs. Royston was the wife of the notorious bank robber Howard “Heavy” Royston of the infamous Fleagle gang.

May 23, 1928, Ralph Fleagle, his brother Jake Fleagle, George J. Abshier, (a.k.a. Bill Messick), and Howard "Heavy" Royston descended upon the First National Bank in Lamar, Colorado with the intention of committing a bank robbery. In the frenzied attack Royston was shot in the face and the gang killed the bank president, A.N. Parrish, as well as his son Jaddo Parrish. The robbers made off with more \$220,000.00 in cash, Liberty Bonds and commercial paper, as well as two hostages.

Back at their hideout in Kansas, with one hostage released and one killed, and in an effort to get Royston medical treatment, the gang lied to a local doctor from Dighton, Kansas stating that a young boy had his foot caught in a tractor so that he would make a house call. Once Royston was treated, they blindfolded and gagged the doctor, shot him in the back of the head and put his body in his own car and shoved it down a ravine north of Scott City, Kansas.

Royston took his portion of the cache and headed to San Andreas, California where he worked as a night engineer at a power plant. He was eventually caught more than a year later, in August 1929, by multiple law agencies including Calaveras County Sheriff Joseph Zwinge. He, as well as his cohorts, were found guilty and sentenced to hang.

Regardless of her affiliation with Howard “Heavy” Royston, Don thought Mrs. Royston was a good teacher but as a young boy he still yearned to be doing anything other than schoolwork, wanting to be outside as often as possible.

“Vern and I grew up together, we were only a few years apart but we were inseparable, we slept out on the porch all summer and halfway into the

winter along with our dog Scrappy before we went into the house.”

Scrappy was a Scottish terrier that had been sent to the family by railway from relatives in the Bay Area. When he arrived he was dressed in a Scottish plaid coat, but quickly incorporated into the country life. He received his humble name as he was fed the table scraps.

“He was a great dog. He was very good at hunting too. When you heard him barking you knew a deer was coming and he would drive it to us. He was a nice dog.”

As a child Don enjoyed playing in the creek, hiking in the surrounding hills and just being a country kid.

“We learned to swim in the Calaveritas creek with the Sweeney boys. The four of us we went camping up the creek together often.” Explaining they would hike for hours with no tent and simply camp out in the countryside.

Though sometimes a young boy’s curiosity can get them in a bit of trouble.

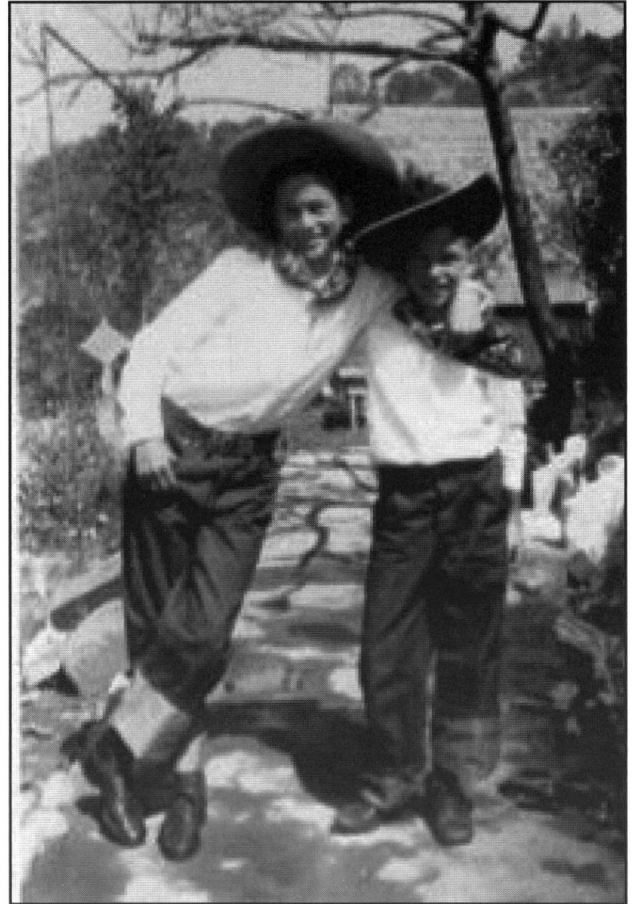
“When I was young I snuck into the dance hall in Calaveritas and went under the benches and stole all the gum stuck to the bottom of the benches. I was so sick. I had spasms for about a month and no one could figure out what was wrong.” Don believed he had gotten some illness from chewing the discarded, previously chewed gum.

Holidays were fun times for the families of Calaveritas.

“Every July 4th we would roast a goat and celebrate with a couple of the other families.”

New Year’s Eve was another exciting celebration.

“I remember one New Year’s Eve we heard dynamite charges being set off all over the county. That was the custom in the old days since we didn’t have fireworks or anything so most folks would set off dynamite. Every New Year’s Eve we would hear this. There was so much mining you could buy dynamite everywhere. Well one year my dad decided to join in on the celebrations and at midnight he put twenty eight sticks of dynamite in the creek and blew out the windows of our house and the Cadamatri and Bacigalupi homes and rattled the DeMartini’s home too. The neighbors were not impressed. Needless to say my dad did not do that again.”



*Don and Vern Cuneo circa 1938-39
– photo courtesy Fritzi Cuneo Dorroh*

Dynamite had other uses in the county too.

“I had seen some folks use dynamite for fishing, but they didn’t get any fish, so I never tried it.”

After completing the fifth grade Don attended school in San Andreas. Often he would get a ride to school from a teacher but had to walk home.

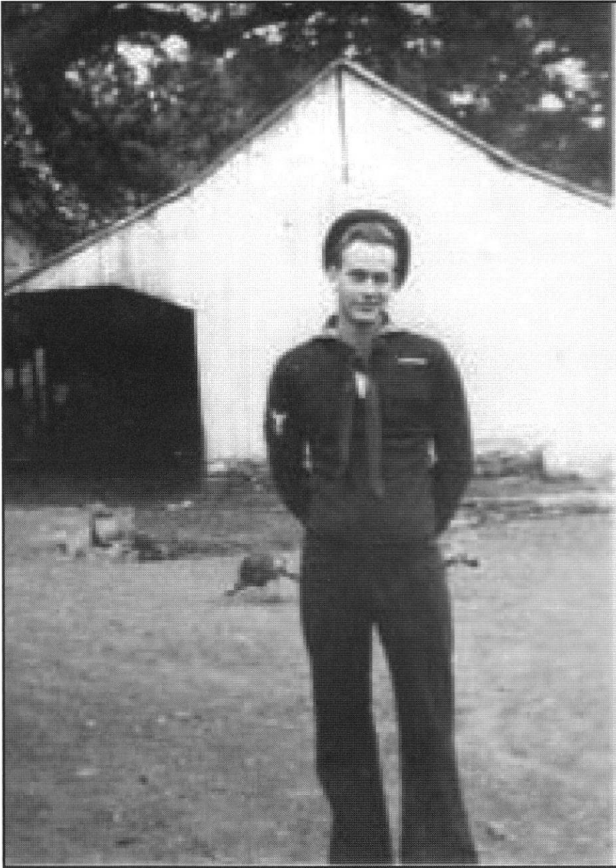
About this time electricity came to Calaveritas.

“We didn’t have any electricity out there, just kerosene lamps and candles but when the cement plant opened, we finally got electricity. Around 1938 my mom got a washing machine and a refrigerator.” This leap into modernization didn’t seem to have any effect on Don because he was such an outside boy.

Don attended Calaveras High School and was able to take a bus.

“A cracker box bus would come to pick us up and we would always encourage the bus driver to cross the creek. One day we got our bus driver Nick Wiebee stuck in the creek for half a day.”

High school provided an opportunity to participate in sports. Don enjoyed tennis and track. He



*Don Cuneo USN 1942
– photo courtesy Fritzi Cuneo Dorroh*

recalled taking Latin yet stated, “now that I’m older I should have paid more attention.”

As a freshman Don was taught to dance by senior Doris Barger and thoroughly enjoyed this form of entertainment throughout his life.

Soon Don had his own car, a Model A “with a rumble seat. I paid \$50.00 for that car and sold it three years later for \$50.00. I would take my girlfriend Betty Gould to the cemetery to ‘park’”. He would also take her to dances when he could.

“One time I drove to Fricot City to visit some friends when the left rear wheel came off the car and we plowed in the ground until we stopped. We stayed the night with our friends and the next day found my wheel down the ravine.”

He enjoyed driving to the dance halls, especially the Oak Grove Dance Hall just outside of Valley Springs.

The longest drive he took was to Sacramento where he went to junior college to study aeronautical engineering after graduating high school.

“I was only at Sacramento junior college for about two months when I noticed all my friends

were getting drafted and I didn’t want to wait, so I enlisted in the United States Navy. My mother cried.”

Don enlisted in November 1942 with the job description of Fire Control. “When I enlisted I thought it was fire fighting but it ended up I was shooting guns. It actually worked out perfect because my spot was way up high and I could see all the islands we were going to.”

Don’s first assignment was aboard the USS McCord; a Fletcher class destroyer first launched January 10, 1943. “The McCord was 370 feet long with 350 sailors, 5-inch .38 caliber guns along with 40mm guns, 20mm guns. It was also equipped with 21-inch torpedo tubes, depth charge projectors and depth charge trackers.”

As soon as they were out to sea Don discovered his country boy body wasn’t quite ready for the open ocean.

“I was feeling really seasick so I went up top side to get sick. It was really rough waters, just as I was getting sick a huge wave came over the deck and I just hung on. That was scary.”

“We took our shakedown cruise to San Diego and then on to Pearl Harbor.” (A shakedown cruise is a performance test completed before a ship enters service.)

On November 27, 1943 after supplying at Pearl Harbor the USS McCord was set to sail to the Marshall Islands where Don would see his first action at Kwajalein Atoll.

Kwajalein Atoll in the Marshall Islands was a Japanese held island with an estimated 8100 Japanese soldiers on the island set to defend it as the outermost defensive perimeter in World War II.

The invasion began January 31, 1944 with the USS McCord providing close support fire and ended in Japanese defeat on February 3, 1944. This was one of the first Marshall Islands to be captured by US troops allowing the Pacific Fleet to advance towards the Philippines.

“At the island of Kwajalein I hyperventilated and I had to take a lot of deep breaths after it was over, it seemed dangerous and exciting, we were shooting at the islands, softening it up for the guys going on to shore, we also dropped a lot of depth chargers. I think we got one, if we thought they were there we would fire off of both sides and the fantail.”



A young Don at his butcher shop in Winkler's Grocery Store. Courtesy photo, date unknown.

To some accounts the island was decimated.

There was no rest for the weary; by February 17, 1944 the USS McCord used her ability to hunt submarines and sweep for mines at the Invasion of Eniwetok Atoll, a circular atoll in the Marshall Islands approximately 330 miles northeast of Kwajalein. The main objective was to take the atoll in four stages: the invasion of the two islets adjoining Engebi, Eniwetok and Parry Islands to the south, Engebi to the north, and the remaining small islets with the heaviest Japanese resistance on Eniwetok and Parry Islands. The atoll was secured in five days; February 22, 1944.

"Only after we made the islands safe could we relax a little. We would get some kind of beer, 2.2 or some weak beer. We also got to swim in the lagoons. But we had motorboat patrols around us with machine guns just in case sharks were around. I only remember doing this about two times during my whole time aboard the USS McCord."

The USS McCord was used almost continually in support of landings providing mine sweeping, escort, and patrols. "We did a lot of submarine patrol. I recall the longest we were out on submarine patrol was 40 days."

During his first patrol over the equator Don learned a painful naval tradition.

"We were known as pollywogs until we passed the equator. Once we passed the equator they would shave your head and you had to crawl on your hands and knees through a group of sailors all with a rope in their hands ready to beat you with the rope. I tell you, I crawled pretty fast. After I made it to the end of the line I was no longer a pollywog, I was a shell back. I sure had lots of welts. Luckily we only had to become a shellback once, most of us were pollywogs and the older guys couldn't wait to beat us up."

"From patrol around Bougainville we headed to Saipan and Tinian."

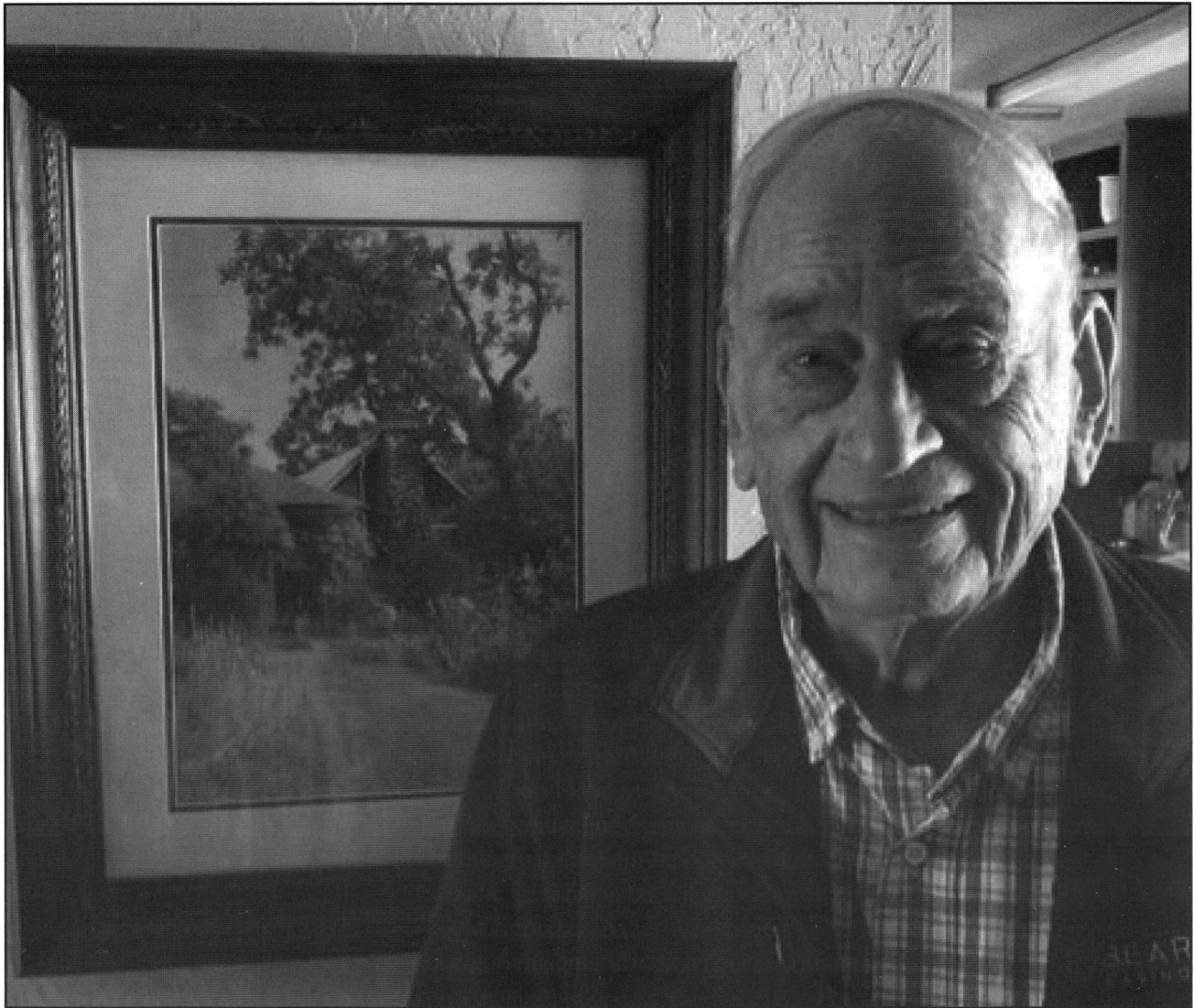
On June 15, 1944 the USS McCord was involved in the invasion of Saipan in the Mariana Islands; the goal to gain control of the island's air base to allow launching of B-29 bombers. The McCord took part in the shelling of Tinian.

Though Don saw much more action, the memories are better left to him.

After two years serving aboard the USS McCord "I was transferred to the USS Columbus in Boston. We were getting ready to go around to the invasion in Japan when it ended; the war ended."

"I wrote my mother all the time, every chance I got out there."

According to Don's cousin, Fritz Dorroh, Don would write to her father Fred – Don's older brother – with a short code at the bottom of almost every



Don Cuneo standing next to a photo of his family home in Calaveritas, a gift from the Calaveras County Historical Society. As a young boy he recalled "I hauled a lot of rocks from the creek to build the chimney".

letter letting Fred know if he was seeing action or not. If his ship saw action he would finish his letter with "I sure wish I was hunting at Bear Trap."

"I don't remember any letters that didn't end with that," said Fritzi.

"Though almost all of the guys I served with are gone I still keep in touch with Chuck Genovese, he lives in Seattle and he's 100 years old. But the rest of them, they are all gone."

Younger brother Vern followed in Don's footsteps and enlisted in the United States Navy as "fire patrol like me, because he knew what it was." Vern served during the Korean War.

Don went from making \$80 a month to "standing in the unemployment line in San Andreas."

"But as luck would have it Danny Queirolo asked me how I would like to work in a butcher shop. That was the start of my career, I went on to own my own butcher shop in Winkler's for twenty years."

"I loved working in the butcher shop. The only downside was when we would all go hunting and my friends would leave me dressing and skinning all the deer while they would go out drinking."

Before Don was even thirty years old he "decided to run for Supervisor, I was the youngest one in the state when I was elected, and I served five terms. I enjoyed helping people, but being a supervisor, someone is always for something you are for or against you."

As Chairman of the board for two terms Don helped "get the mental health program started. We

were the welfare department too. We would go out and talk to welfare people. I remember one visit we visited a guy in a little cabin who only had kerosene lamps. The fumes were so bad we tried to get him to leave but he refused. He passed away the next day. It was heart breaking some of the people, the way they lived out in the boon docks.”

While serving on the Board of Supervisors he aided in getting wild turkeys introduced to Calaveras County.

“We had a fish and game committee that thought our terrain was perfect for wild turkeys. So we got about forty or fifty from Texas and left some at the quarry in Calaveritas, some in West Point and some in Copperopolis. Now there are wild turkeys everywhere.”

In 1964 Don bought the Treat Hotel in San Andreas and renamed it the Black Bart. He managed, cooked and did whatever else needed doing, but enjoyed cooking the most.

Don is now retired in San Andreas and is active in the Veteran of Foreign War Post 2600 in San Andreas. He has served in multiple capacities including Commander.

Not one to let grass grow beneath his feet, he caters and cooks for many local charity events and enjoys playing Santa during the Christmas holidays in San Andreas.

“He was a lot of fun,” said Fritzi, “he still is.”

He is the proud father of three daughters, three grandchildren, three great grandchildren and one great-great granddaughter.



May-July 2020

Donations

Patrick Martin, Calaveras County Building & Grounds - Reclaimed wood from the old AG building, which was torn down at the Government Center in June 2020.

Eric Smith volunteered his time to help gather the reclaimed wood from the Ag Building.

Gary Herd purchased lunch for the volunteers who helped with the Red Barn Mining Exhibit.

A special thanks to all who have helped with the long-awaited head frame for the mining exhibit at the Red Barn Museum! Dave Sanders, Gary Herd, Jerry Perkins, Bob Kovacs, Ken James, Jesse May, Rick Dietrich, James Mann, the Sender Family, Carson Hill Rock and Herd’s Machine Shop.

Calaveras County Historical Society

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May–July 2020

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The Calaveras County Historical Society is a non-profit corporation. It meets on the fourth Thursday of each month in various communities throughout the County. Locations and scheduled programs are announced in advance. Some meetings include a dinner program, and visitors are always welcome.

The Society operates the Calaveras County Museum which is open daily from 10:00 to 4:00 in the historic County courthouse located at 30 Main Street in San Andreas; and the historic Red Barn Museum at 891 Mountain Ranch Road, also in San Andreas, which is open Thursday to Sunday, 10:00 to 4:00.

The Society's office is located in historic San Andreas, the Calaveras County seat. Visitors are always welcome to stop by the office for assistance with research, and are encouraged to visit the museums while in the area. The office is open Monday through Friday from 8:30 to 4:00, and the telephone number is (209) 754-1058, or contact us at: CCHS@goldrush.com; Red Barn Museum (209) 754-0800.