

The Persico family —

Friday, June 25, 1999 Willits Frontier Days Special Section—13

prominent in area history



Frank Persico

Having finished with the Dill family history, we will begin the history of the family chosen as Grand Marshals this year: The Persicos. The history contained in these pages was originally gathered by Rena Lynn-Moore over a 12-year period when she was working at The Willits News several years ago. Some of the references she makes in the stories are to buildings or businesses that no longer exist, or have moved, like the old Sears building (now Computer Cave) or places where people used to live. In keeping with the tone of her stories, we have left the original references intact. We hope you enjoy the history of another fascinating family with long roots in the community. Their story will pick up in next year's special edition.

During the latter part of the 1880's, the great migration began of European working people to the promised land of America. One of these was handsome, barrel-chested Frank Persico of Genoa, Italy, who longed to find a better life for his family and who carefully saved his meager wages to pay for passage to America in 1899, when he was 24 years old.

He came by boat around the tip of South America up to San Francisco, leaving his young wife and two babies behind to await the day when he could send the fare for them to join him.

In San Francisco, with only a limited knowledge of English, the big burly Italian had no trouble finding work as a laborer for the railroad, working between San Francisco and Cloverdale, the northern most terminus at the time. Stories of beautiful country to the north with trees of unbelievable size and work for all spurred him on. As soon as he had saved enough of his wages he took the stage north, ending up in the small town of Willits.

Within a very short time he had settled into the life of the town. The remainder of his small savings went into the purchase of a wagon and a team of four horses.

He had picked up enough English by now to make inquiries around town as to what services were needed. On the basis of what the townspeople told him, he opened a freight hauling business to carry greatly needed lumber into the remote community of Covelo, going through Hearst and Eden Valley. After delivering his merchandise there, he would load up with bags of grain grown in Round Valley to bring back to Laytonville and Willits, taking the old original road through Dos Rios.

Once, when making the return run during one of the winter months, he was caught by a snowstorm midway between Dos Rios and Laytonville and could not get through. He was snowbound for several days, alone, and kept himself and the team alive by eating from the bags of barley he carried.

The freight service proved so successful, and Frank continued to live so frugally and save so carefully, that he was able to buy into a partnership in a saloon with Jim Flaherty situated on the corner where the California Diner is now located. By 1902, after less than three years in the new world he had chosen for his family, the energetic young immigrant was able to send for his wife and two

children, Louise and Charles, then aged four and two.

It must have been an incredible journey for the shy young Italian girl who had never been away from her home and who spoke no English. Frank sent carefully detailed instructions to her, including printed cards with his name and address which she pinned on herself and the children for the entire trip.

She carried a wicker basket with her, packed with food to eat along the way. As the trip took over a month, one wonders what kind of food

could have been packed to last that long, and what she did when it ran out. In any event, the three of them survived and somehow managed eventually to reach the town of Willits, halfway around the world from home. The railroad had just been completed into Willits in that year, so the young mother and children were able to come all the way by train.

Frank had rented a house for his family on Railroad Avenue, just north of San Francisco Avenue. The house is still standing, but has been

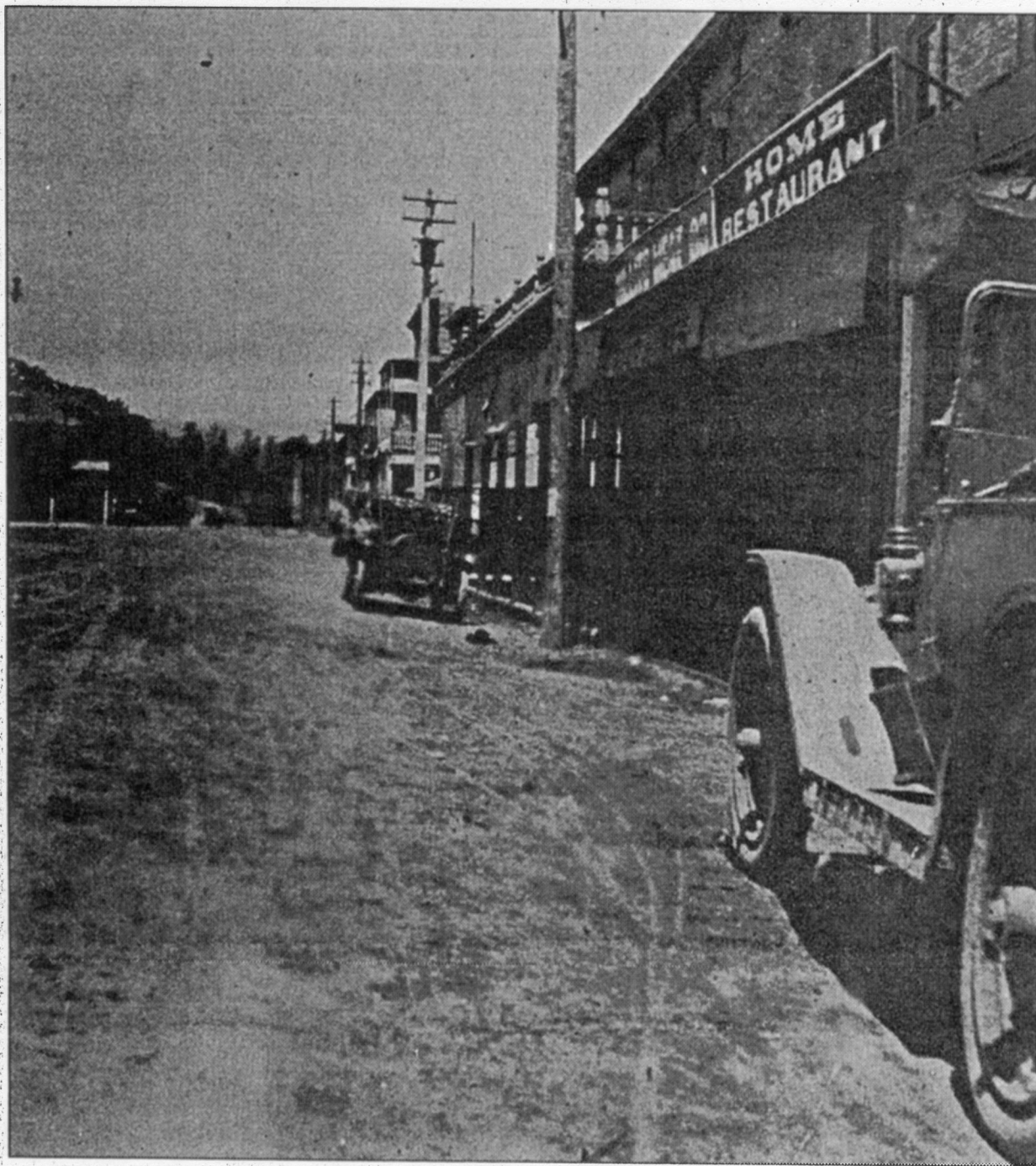
completely remodeled.

In that house a second son, Leandro, was born in 1903, followed by Pete in 1905. Leandro, later known as Lee and then as Dink, is the last of the three brothers and has lived in Willits all of his 72 years.

The family was still living in the house on Railroad Avenue during the 1906 earthquake. Dink, three years old at the time, was injured when a heavy platter fell off a shelf and cut his head.

Julia, who had expected to be very lonely in her new life, found instead a growing Italian colony in the town – the Pietronaves, Pedroncellis, Cerattos, Quadrios and Quarteronis – and the women of these families drew together in friendship and help for one another. All of these families had come to Willits in much the same way – the father coming ahead to work, save money and get established before sending for the women and children to follow.

Persicos, from page 13



Looking north on Main Street in 1911, the year the Persicos built their Italia Hotel, which was directly across the street from this point. To the right is the old Central Hotel, formerly known as the Palace.

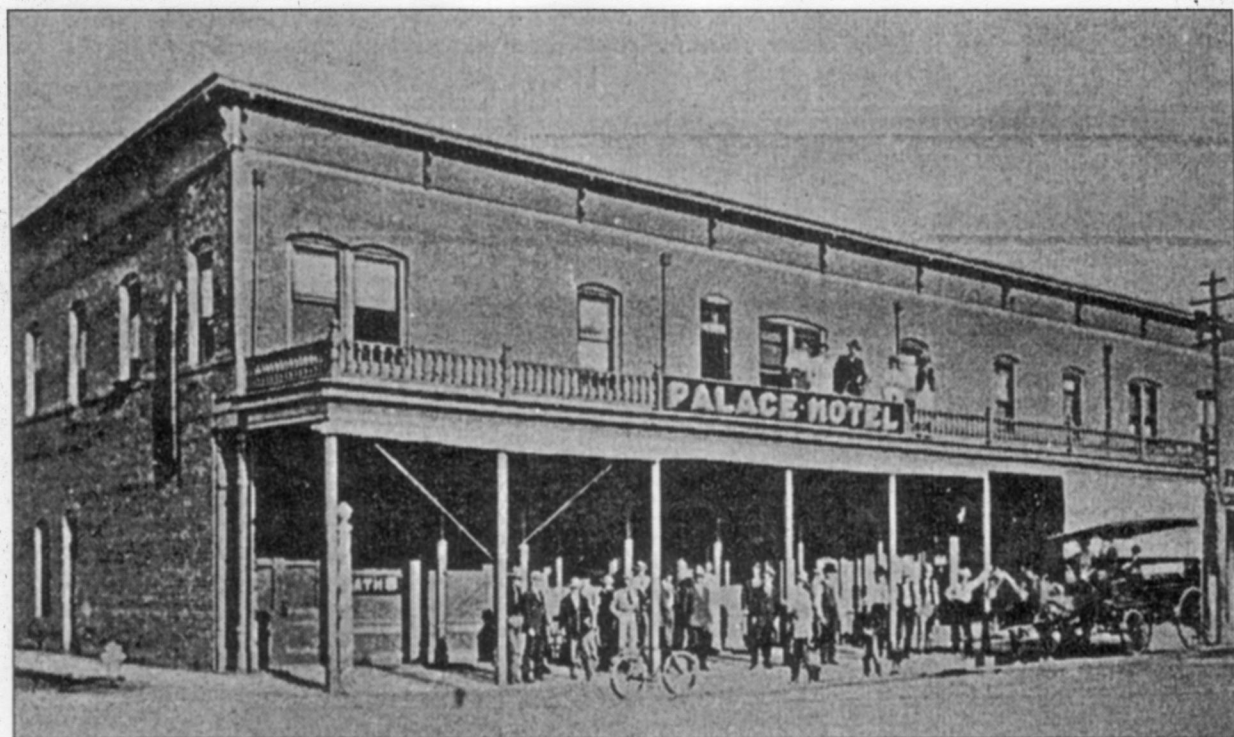
Life was not easy for those early women. There was no water in the houses, just hand pumps in the yard. It was the woman's job to pump and carry the water indoors. All the laundry was done by hand, and then all the voluminous styles of the day were carefully ironed.

Cooking was constant. The Italian families

were used to three heavy meals a day. Baked goods of all kinds were staples of their diet. Julia's load was lightened with the arrival in 1906 of her sister Maria, who stayed with the Persicos until her marriage the following year to Augustino Recagno, foreman in the Northwestern planing mill located near the depot.



The Persico Family, 1935



The Palace Hotel

The Persicos build a

Business prospered for Frank Persico during the time the family lived on Railroad Avenue. He had opened a second saloon, this one located at Burger Creek above Dos Rios, catering to the railroad crews who were working on the building of the lines north from Willits to Eureka.

Lee Sr. remembered riding with his father up to the Burger Creek Saloon in a wagon carrying big bags of silver and gold to be used for cashing pay checks and making change. The youngster could not understand why they always carried bags of money up there, only to bring more bags of money back home, the proceeds from the business.

Frank was doing so well that he bought two pieces of property on newly opened

Central Street, and hired Will and Roy Whited to build his family a home. The house which still stands across the street from the Alecksick truck yard, is noticeable because of the wooden water tower that stands just behind it. The house cost \$500, paid for in cash, and it was to remain in the Persico family for the next 35 years. The family moved into their new home in 1907, and about the same time Frank began to look around for new business worlds to conquer. Shrewdly, he decided to go into the hotel business, and leased the two story Europa Hotel from the Stefani family which was located on the corner where the Rexall Pharmacy parking lot is now.

Although Willits was a small town it was filled with hotels, lodging halls and

rooming houses due to the large transient trade and the unusual number of single men drawn to the area by the jobs available in the woods, mills and on the railroad.

In addition to the Europa, there were the Hotel Willits, the Central Hotel (located on the corner where Cable TV is now) and the Lombardo, run by the Figone family and located where Mangano's store is now. The big new Buckner Hotel, which stood where Sears store is today, went down during the 1906 earthquake.

It was about 1909 when Frank took over the Europa. As Julia had the job of running the kitchen and overseeing the preparation of the meals, and all the children also had jobs to do, it was decided to move the family into the hotel and lease out



The original Hotel Willits , looking east down Commercial Street to the Mercantile Building on the corner.

Hotel on Main Street

the home on Central Street.

They had no sooner moved in when young Lee became ill with a malady that was never precisely diagnosed. The only doctor in town at the time was Dr. Woelffel, who had a fondness for strong drink. Frank did not trust him to treat his son so Mrs. Jeff Owens was hired as a nurse and came in every day for nearly two years to care for the boy.

Mrs. Owens' husband was manager of the cattle operation of Northwestern Lumber Company and she and her husband lived in the old Hiram Willits home behind the Hotel Willits, about where Dr. Myers office is today.

During this period, Frank

was not only worried about his son, he was having problems with his landlord who kept increasing the amount of rent demanded for the hotel until Frank determined to build his own hotel next door.

So the Italia Hotel went up in 1911, just where the Willits Pharmacy is located today. It was built by the Whites using all redwood timbers throughout, and was three stories tall with only a few feet between it and the rival Europa. Angered, the owner of the Europa put up a solid brick "spite wall" between the two hotels, blocking out all light into the south side windows of the new Italia.

Water for the hotel come from two large springs

located at the rear of the property, piped up to a large holding tank and then to the kitchen. There was no running water to the rooms, nor any plumbing. Wooden outhouses were lined up along the alley behind the hotel and there were chamber pots in all the rooms. It was the job of the hotel chamber maid to empty the pots each morning.

There was also no heat in the rooms. "Folks kept warm with whiskey," Lee said, "and in fact kept so warm they slept with the windows open." There were wood burning stoves in the lobby and dining room, and of course in the kitchen.

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Hotel, from page 15

Meals were served family style with a gallon jug of wine set out on every table at every meal. For room and board, which meant three huge meals a day, the charge was \$18 a month.

The hotel, with Julia's good homecooked Italian food, was a success. But in its second year of operation, tragedy struck. Fire, determined later to have been deliberately set, broke out during the dinner hour and rapidly swept through the all-wood building.

There was no loss of life, but the Persicos lost all their personal possessions. Frank had just returned from San Francisco with a handsome new rig and harness which

was in a storage room at the rear of the hotel. It was lost, along with everything else, including a trunk full of gold pieces.

Many of the loggers and other workmen of the time were paid in gold. Lee recalled that he and his brothers were frequently tipped a gold coin for running errands or shining boots. At Christmas time it was common practice for loggers and cowboys to hand out \$10 gold pieces to the children.

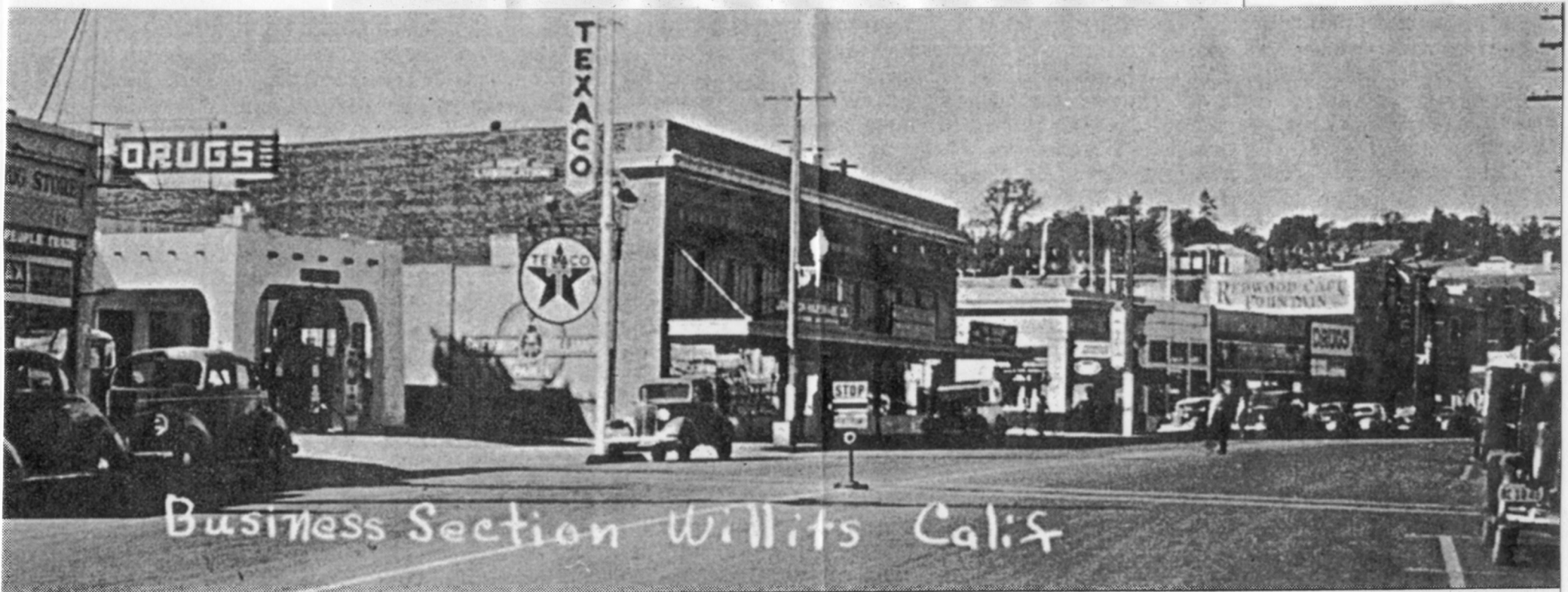
Undaunted by the loss of his hotel, Frank began to plan a bigger, better one the day after the fire. Once again he contracted with the Whites to build a three-story, all

concrete structure on the same spot. In August of 1915, the beautiful new Grand Hotel opened for business. It had 40 rooms, two dining rooms, a bar and a barber shop. This time there was even indoor plumbing, as the town's sewer lines had been installed a short time before.

Water was now piped to the rooms, but still came from the well behind the hotel and in fact continued to be piped from the well until as late as 1940.

The concrete used in the construction of the hotel was made with gravel out of the local creeks, hauled to the site in horse drawn wagons and then shoveled and mixed

*Early days of Willits'
business community*



Business Section Willits Calif

Willits downtown

When Lee Persico Sr. was a boy living in his family's hotel where the Willits Pharmacy now stands, one of his and his brothers' favorite chores was making "foot juice," as they called the homemade wine their parents served at mealtime.

The grapes came up from Calpella and Healdsburg by the wagonload and were hauled into the hotel basement and dumped into big vats. Lee and his brothers then tramped around with bare feet in the vats, crushing the grapes to extract the juice.

Wine was a staple of the Italian families' diets, but most of the rough, tough lumberjacks and railroad workers preferred stronger drink. There were 13 saloons in town, and they opened early in the morning.

It was the custom for the saloons to give each customer his first drink free of charge, so some of the men made it a practice to start at one end of town and work their way up Main Street, getting a free drink at each bar and getting thoroughly soused in the process.

About halfway along the route, the drinker would also manage to have a free lunch, as another feature of the saloons was a free spread of food laid out on the counter. This included sourdough bread, salami, cheese, pickles and olives.

Whiskey was bought by the saloons in barrels, and sold at 10 cents a shot. Most men carried flat pocket flasks, which could be refilled for 25 cents. Considering the amount of whiskey consumed, the number of bars in town, and the caliber of men who came in from the surrounding

woods to let off steam on weekends there was surprisingly little disturbances up and down Main Street.

During the early days, there was only one town constable, with a couple of deputies. Frank Persico was elected constable early in his career and retained an honorary position as such for the rest of his life.

Another flourishing business of the day was that of the "ladies establishment," as the red light houses were politely known. One of the largest was Mrs. Bell's establishment, which was located next to the railroad track just behind where Bob Brown lives today.

Lee Persico Sr. recalled making deliveries to the place when he was a boy, and always receiving a warm smile and a big tip.

"The women in those

houses remained very aloof and when they went out, which they only did infrequently, they were dressed to kill in big plumed hats and gowns with long sweeping trains," Lee recalled.

Some of the more popular of the ladies had special boyfriends who would rent fancy rigs to take their lady friends out for Sunday afternoon drives up and down Main Street. Mrs. Bell's establishment was eventually torn down, and Lee still had some of the lumber from the famous "house."

Just to the north of the Persico's Grand Hotel was Fred Plato's barber shop, the same building where Emil Gundstrom's shoe repair shop is today. Hair cuts were 25 cents and the heaviest beards were shaved for 35 cents. One

of the most popular services offered by the barber shop was a hot bath in a round metal tub for 50 cents, a Saturday night special for the crews coming in from the woods.

When the handsome new hotel was opened (with marble washbasins and brass bedsteads in every room), Fred Plato moved his barbershop into the hotel. A fancy new feature was the revolving barber pole set up on the sidewalk which wound up like a clock and ran for 12 hours. It was transparent, with a couple of light bulbs inside that lit up at night.

Where the Willits Creamery is today, there was a vacant lot. In the little red building next to it, there were real estate offices which also offered notary services and insurance. The name of the

firm was Roth and Goldberg, operated by Con Goldberg and Judge E.H. Roth.

At the time the Grand Hotel opened, another new building was nearing completion, the Mohn Building, which is where the Willits Cleaners is located today. It was built by Harry Mohn, the undertaker, with a mortuary and chapel downstairs and living quarters on the second floor.

Across the street from the hotel was the new White House building, which housed a furniture store and a tobacco shop and pool hall run by the Simmons brothers. Next door to that was the Lombardo Hotel owned by the Figones, the Willits Meat Company, The Home Restaurant and another furniture store owned by the O'Dells on the corner where the Plaza Cafe is today. Across Mendocino Street was the

Central Hotel, which had been leased by Gus VanCleemput, manager of the Hotel Willits.

The Home Restaurant was run by one of the Chinese families in town at the time. There were also two Chinese laundries.

Lee remembers one Chinese family lived in a building facing the alley behind today's Creamery, and another family lived at the rear of their laundry behind Dr. Babcock's home.

The women of the families had bound feet and spoke no English, and were a source of great curiosity to the children of the town.

During Chinese New Year's, the Chinese people celebrated with firecrackers and handed out strange candles and nutmeats to all the children.

Childhood memories

Frank and Julia Persico's daughter, Louise, married and left home the year before the new Grand Hotel opened, so the many chores of helping to run the family business fell to the three boys.

A favorite job of the boys was to drive the horse-drawn wagon "bus," one of the three such vehicles in town which met each train as it pulled into the station in a competitive hustling for customers.

The boys attended the old, two-story, Pine Street grammar school which was located at the rear of the lot where the Grange Hall is today. Pete, the youngest, attended Daugherty School. Lee Sr. recalls his first teacher there was Margaret Simonson, a good teacher, but strict, as they all were.

"Everything was very military," Lee reported. "The kids were lined up and

marched in and out of classes, going outdoors for recess every two hours. There was no talking in class or in line, without permission."

The only restrooms were in the basement. There was no athletic program, except for a calisthenics drill which began each school day. Although all the boys went in for sports, there was no sports program at any of the school levels, not even high school, so all practice sessions for baseball, basketball and football were held before school started, during the lunch hour and after school.

Smoking was taboo for any age, and the smell of tobacco on a youngster's breath was enough to get him expelled. The kids also were not permitted to enter any of the pool halls in town. Talking back to a teacher, or for that

matter to any adult, was unheard of.

"Children received such strict discipline at home that it carried over into the school day," Lee explained. "But in spite of the strictness, there was great family love and devotion. I don't remember ever seeing either one of my parents strike any of us children, but when they spoke, we hopped!"

The many creeks that flowed through town were a favorite source of recreation for the town children. Willits Creek, running out along Exley Lane and then up to Brooktrails, offered some especially good swimming and fishing holes, plus ten-foot falls just this side of the Northwestern mill (Brooktrails). Lee remembered going out to the falls with a gang, catching crawfish and



Thelma Sawyers Sunday School

in early Willits

cooking them in a tin can over an open fire.

One of the best swimming holes was just past the place where Isom Frost lived. "Old man" Frost used to sit out on his front porch in a rawhide covered rocking chair, and although many of the other children were afraid of him, the Persico boys always stopped and chatted with him, especially Lee, who had his eyes on a mare the old man owned. He had inherited his father's love of horses.

Another general pastime was "pie snatching" at the Hotel Willits. The alley behind the hotel ran past the kitchen window with wide sills on which the Chinese cook used to set his pies to cool. The kids knew which days and at what

times the pies were due to be set out and at least once a week they would manage to make off with one.

Once, when a big party was planned at the hotel, the cook set out an unusual number of pies and the kids took two of them. On their next foray, the cook was waiting for them. He had a deal to offer. If the kids would promise to stop stealing pies, he would agree to make one pie a week just for them. The deal was made, and the word went around among all the kids - leave the hotel pies alone. Lee said those pies were works of art, 12 to 15 inches across and three to four inches deep.

Once Lee was part of an ill-fated watermelon snatching. A boy in his teens worked for the

O'Dells, who had a furniture store on Main Street. One weekend when the O'Dells were out of town, the boy decided to "borrow" their new horse and buggy rig and invited several youngsters, including young Lee, to go along on a watermelon hunt.

They drove out what is now East Commercial and Valley Road to a big farm which was across from where the Valley Oaks trailer park is today and which had a large field of ripe watermelons.

The boys loaded up the rig and headed back for town. On the way, one of the reins broke and the horse took off at a gallop, bouncing kids and watermelon out to right and

See **CHILDHOOD**, page 20

Childhood, from page 17 —

left. Just in front of the Coleman Ranch, there was a big dip in the road (there were no bridges then).

The buggy flew up in the air and came down with a crash which split open the wagon as well as the remaining watermelons. Lee said he does not recall what the outcome of the affair was, except that the ringleader lost his job with the O'Dells.

Halloween always presented a special challenge. One surefire stunt was to carry outdoor privies (which were

standard for all houses) into town and line them up on Main Street. Once in awhile, an enterprising group would place a privy up on the roof of the house to which it belonged.

The stunt that was talked about for years occurred when an unknown group of young engineers dismantled a complete wagon, hauled it piece by piece on top of the grammar school, and there reassembled it for the morning-after amazement of the town.

Life of a buckaroo in

When Lee Persico Sr., was 13 years old, he went to work for William Henshaw, who was the owner at that time of Eden Valley Ranch, one of the oldest and largest in the county.

Schools were lenient in those days about letting youngsters take whatever jobs they could, and Lee put in the next four summers at the ranch, plus portions of each winter. It was during World War I and all of the regular ranch hands – Perry Smith and the Houx brothers, among them – had been drafted into service. So, T.B. Hicks, the ranch foreman, took on several young boys to help at the ranch.

Before leaving for the ranch job, young Lee had paid a visit to his old friend Isom Frost. That mare of Frost's which the youngster had been eyeing for so long had a colt. The boy was determined to have it. It took several sessions of negotiations, but he finally got it for \$75.

He had just broken in the horse when the ranch job came up, so he rode it out to Eden Valley and kept it there to continue training it in his spare time. A year later, he sold it for \$150, considered quite a shrewd feat in those days.

Lee started out as a chore boy on the ranch, working from sunup to sundown for room and board and \$20 a month, but his horsemanship soon boosted him into the upper social stratum of ranch life. He became a buckaroo, making \$3 a day riding the range, rounding up strays and driving stock to Willits for shipment on the train, a

trip that took three days. He was the youngest cowboy on the ranch.

Eden Valley ran huge herds of cattle, some of which were wild. Years before, the Indians had driven cattle across that area and at least some of the cattle were lost on each drive. The buckaroos would go out into the brush to hunt down these strays and their progeny, to bring them back to join the ranch herd.

There was a summer camp up on the flanks of San Hedrin where they would take the steers during the summer months to fatten them up before taking them on the drive to town. There were also frequent roundups of the wild pigs that roamed the area, with sometimes as many as 1000 head being driven to market.

There were about 20 full time ranch employees, a hard working, hard riding, rough and tumble bunch. Guns were forbidden, and every man was expected to carry his weight in work. The men slept in bunk houses made of logs, chinked with blue clay, and with small wood stoves as the only source of heat in the cold winters which frequently brought heavy snows.

A breakfast gong rang in the main house at 6:30 a.m. and another at 6 p.m. for dinner. However, when the men had to go out on the range, they left before daylight and the ranch foreman would get up to fix breakfast for them before they left. They took nothing with them to eat during the long day.

The first time Lee went out

with the men, about 2 p.m. he asked when they were going to have lunch. One of the older cowboys handed him a plug of tobacco and said, "That's your lunch." The boy was so hungry, he tried it and got sick as a result, much to the amusement of the men.

When the cowboys went up on San Hendrin to the summer camp, they would stay with the cattle there for several weeks. During that time, someone from the ranch would bring a pack horse loaded with groceries out to them every three or four days. Near where they set up camp was Rock Out Springs, where they kept canned milk, butter and eggs. The main meal of the day was usually a kind of stew made with potatoes and whatever meat had been brought up from the ranch – beef, lamb or pork, butchered right at the ranch.

On the cattle or hog drives into Willits, the men would usually spend the first night at the Berry Ranch, which was actually still part of the Eden Valley operation at the time. Lee recalled he carved his name and the date "1917" on a barn at the Berry Ranch, and the barn is still there.

The second night, the hands would put up at the Bahn Ranch on the Hearst Road, and then the third day they would make it on into Willits. The drive came over Red Hill, down Hearst Road along what is now East Commercial Street to the railroad tracks, where they would turn back north and proceed up along the tracks past the roundhouse to the loading platforms which were about where the high school

early days Eden Valley



Eden Valley Ranch main house where the ranch hands ate their meals. Next to the house is one of the original buildings on the ranch probably built around 1870.

is today.

That was the same general area where the big race track and fairgrounds had been located in the 1890s. At the time Lee was a boy, the track had been taken up, but the barns and horse stalls remained where Hiram and George Willits had kept their champion stallions. It was a favorite hangout for the boys of the town and was also the site of the first rodeos in town, which were put on by a

promoter named Ed Brown.

Just south of that area was the John Pedroncelli dairy, about where the County Yard is now located. This too, was a favorite place for youngsters to hang out.

In 1918, during the time Lee was working at Eden Valley, prohibition came in. His father, Frank, decided it was no longer profitable to run his Grand Hotel, so he leased it to Gus VanCleemput, manager of the

Central Hotel across the street. Gus promptly changed the name to Grand Central. VanCleemput was to operate it under that name until 1923.

Frank and Julia moved back into their home on Central Street and Frank went into the wood business. He bought a team of grey mules from Northwestern, and a wagon which he kept stabled in the large barn behind the house on Central and which is still there.

Slaughter house three and

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other '20s amusements

The Persico brothers attended classes in the three-story high school which was built at the corner of Maple and Pine Streets in 1907, and which was eventually destroyed by a spectacular night fire in 1928. The school was surrounded by several large oak trees that were loaded with mistletoe, and from that the high school annual took its name. Lee Persico went out for the limited sports program offered at that time and was a member of the school baseball team. He was one of the best, and his teammates began calling him "Dink" after the famous Stanford athlete, Dink Templeton. The nickname stuck and is still used by his friends today.

Football had not yet come into vogue. The first football team of nine men was formed during Dink's senior year at high school, but soon faded out due to lack of interest and

players.

The first radio ever heard by Dink and his classmates was a crystal set built by the high school science teacher, who used to put it out on the second floor balcony of the school so not only the science class, but the entire school body could enjoy the squeaky broadcasts. Mostly the students listened to shortwave broadcasts picked up from ships at sea.

Other than playing baseball in competition with groups throughout the county, the teenagers of that time found plenty of other activities. Nearly all of them came from farming and ranching families and had a keen interest in horses which persisted even after the boys also developed an interest in flivver cars, which were a prized possession of the few youngsters who had them.

One Saturday recreation was to ride horseback around to the

different slaughter houses in town. One of these was Deed Wimmer's which was located out Valley Street, across from where the Louis Zanella home is today. Deed had his own butcher shop, located where Laney's Dress Shop is now, which had formerly been operated by Ray and Austin Muir.

There was also a slaughter house on the 200-acre Bray Ranch, later the Colli Ranch, located along the railroad tracks at the end of Shell Lane. The meat butchered there was sold at a shop located where The Willits News was before the fire on Main Street.

The third slaughter house was located at the end of Bittenbender Lane, and was operated by the Diamond D Ranch and Northwestern Mill to provide meat for the mill hands.

After making the rounds of

those places, the youngsters would then head up to the tannery which was just off the old Fort Bragg Road along what is now called Harm's Lane. This had formerly been a flour mill, but during the '20s it tanned the hides from the slaughter houses for sale to the Bay Area manufacturers of leather harnesses and boots.

There was probably more entertainment for the town people at that time than there is now. The Chataqua Show made regular stops here, setting up in a big tent on the open lot where the Van Hotel now stands. The Chataqua offered entertainment of a fairly high level—opera stars and impassioned orators like William Jennings Bryant. These shows were considered of such educational value that students were allowed to cut school in

order to attend.

Traveling tent shows brought vaudeville, plays and comedy acts. These were usually set up in the open field where the City Hall and Firehouse are now located.

One of the most popular entertainments were the traveling minstrel shows that appeared at Whited's Hall at least twice a year. In fact, these black-face routines and string instrument music shows were so well liked, a local group was formed and was much in demand to perform for any gathering. Among the performers were George White, Bill Owens, Frank Corbett and Fred Sharp.

Dances were frequent and well attended, not only at Whited Hall every Saturday night, but in surrounding towns

as well. The Dreamland Dance Pavilion was at The Forks just north of Ukiah, and the Longvale Inn also had a dance hall. The type of music was mixed. Bey Barnwell and his group offered country and fiddle music; Arthur Guslander had a group with Mrs. John Keller at the piano that played the popular tunes of the day—waltzes, fox trots and the Charleston; and for really special events, Jack Crow's orchestra was imported from the Bay Area.

Dink Persico was graduated with the class of 1922. It consisted of three students—Dink, Lorenzo Fioni whose parents owned the Lombardi Hotel, and Muriel Saxon, whose father was manager of the

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grocery store in the Irvine and Muir group of stores located where J.C. Penney's now stands. At the time Dink was graduated, his father had gone to work as a foreman with the construction crew building the section of Highway 101 from Calpella to Oil Well Hill. This was over the original stretch of dirt road which was the old stage coach line from Cloverdale north. The work consisted of grading, laying rock and topping it with macadam, with teams of horses and mules used for hauling supplies. The job lasted two years. During that time, the VanCleemput's gave

up their operation of the Grand Central Hotel and built the Van Hotel. The Grand Central was then taken over by Frank and Nellie Corbett, who renamed it the Hotel Corbett.

Livery stables and

At the conclusion of his two-year job with the highway construction crew, young Dink Persico went to work for the Quadrio Brothers' store.

This famous Willits landmark was located on the now empty lot directly across Main Street from the Post Office. It was a complete general merchandise country store, offering everything from staple groceries to hardware and clothing. Originally owned by brothers Joe and Phillip Quadrio, Phillip's interest was later taken over by his son Basilio, and James Colli and Angelo Renaldi joined the firm as partners.

Dink was hired to help out when partner Colli took off for a trip to Italy. His job was to help out in the store and to make the twice daily delivery run in the firm's special built Model T truck with a wagon body and side curtains that rolled up and down.

Customers who had telephones would call in their orders, and when Dink went out to make those deliveries, he would stop in at the homes

of those customers who did not have telephones, to pick up their orders in person. Those orders would be delivered on the afternoon run.

Directly across the street from Quadrio's where the Circle-K market was built, Upp's livery stable and blacksmith shop was located and still doing business in the early '20s. Although a number of automobiles were to be seen parked up and down Main Street at that time, horse drawn wagons were still in common use and there were five livery stables.

Bill May's stable was located where Gil Holmes' garage and station are now; Dryden's stable was located where Al's Redwood Room is; Henry Bowen's was where the Community Center is now under construction, and the "Company" barn (as townspeople called the Northwestern stable) was located where the mortuary is now on West Commercial Street.

The Company barn burned to the ground during the time

Dink was working at Quadrio's, with the loss of several fine horses including the Wells Fargo team which pulled that firm's delivery wagon when it met each arriving train to pick up shipped merchandise and deliver it to the various customers in town. The Wells Fargo office was located where the Montgomery Ward catalog office had been located.

When Standard Oil built their bulk plant near the present high school, oil, gas and kerosene deliveries were made around town in a horse drawn wagon.

Another common sight was the wagon drawn by a team of grey mules which Frank Persico had bought from Northwestern, and which was used to make deliveries to wood yard customers.

In 1925, after the Daugherty School was no longer in use, Frank bought the building and the ground on which it stood. He sold all the fine redwood timbers in the building to the Whited brothers for use in their construction business, and set up his wood yard on the grounds.

Cutters were hired to cut oak and madrone on the Buckhorn Ranch south of town and on "Company land" owned by Perry Smith at the north end of town. Using hand saws, the workers cut and split all the wood in four-foot lengths and then hauled it to the yard on Central Street for stacking and drying. At the time, wood was big business as every home in town used a woodburning stove for both cooking and heating.

During the slightly less than two years that Dink worked at Quadrio's he continued to keep up his interest in horses, and always had at least one or

bootleg booze in the '20s



The interior of the Qadrio Brothers grocery store. From left, are an unidentified customer, Basilio Quadrio, James Colli in the background; in front of him an unknown salesman, and behind the counter, Angelo Renaldi. It featured pre-sliced and wrapped "store bread" as opposed to the homemade bread from the town's bakeries. At the time, store bread was considered rather special simply because it was new and different.

two stabled in his father's barn behind the house on Central.

He and his brother Pete, who was still in high school, were both popular members of the younger social set. Their older brother, Charles, had already left home to go into construction work in Southern California.

Sometime during 1925, young Florence Butt and her sister Vivian came into Quadrio's with their mother's shopping list. Mr. Butt was an assistant in Art Guslander's Jewelry Store and both girls were in high school, but the family were newcomers to Willits and Dink had not seen the young girls before. With a bit of flirting on both sides, arrangements were made to meet again and for the rest of the time the Butt family lived in Willits, Dink squired young Florence to the various dances and parties in town.

Unfortunately, the family

only stayed a year longer before moving back to the Bay Area and the romance faded, only to be revived nearly 10 years later when Florence came back to Willits on a visit.

In the meantime, in 1926 Dink and Pete Persico took over the management of the family hotel from the Corbetts, and once again the place received a new name — this time the Traveler's Hotel. The Persico brothers were to operate it for the next 15 years under that name.

It was during prohibition and many of the town saloons had closed. The bar in the Hotel had been leased to a man named Wilson and made into an ice cream parlor with redwood bark walls and trim over the bar; outfitted with the traditional round iron ice cream tables and matching chairs.

A number of the bars remained in business, serving

soft drinks and at the same time carrying on a lucrative bootleg business. Booze was as plentiful as ever, if one knew the right back door on which to tap. There were also a number of stills operating back in the hills, if one was brave enough to sample the product.

Dink recalls one gentleman who lived only a couple of doors down from Whited Hall made some of the best home brew in town, and that house became a favorite hangout, especially when there was a dance going on at Whited's.

The Persico family never went in for the illegal traffic, but Dink recalls rather wistfully now, that they could no doubt have made a killing if they had done so. The Traveler's Hotel was always full, and the transient railroad workers who formed a large part of the hotel's clientele, were all heavy drinkers.

Dink Persico's memories

The Persico family has been active in Frontier Days since the year of the first official celebration in 1926. Old Frank Persico and his sons Dink and Pete worked on building the original stands and chutes and dug the first post holes at the grounds. All the lumber and all the labor was donated.

In addition, Dink was an active participant in the rodeo during those first years. He recalls he never entered a rodeo without winning, but the biggest purse he ever won was \$750 in 1933, the year Don Coleman brought up his show from Hollywood.

During those early days, there were very few professional riders. Most of the entrants were local boys or cowboys from the various ranches throughout the county who came to town and stayed all week, spending money freely for their one big annual fling at "city life." Gambling was open, bootleg booze was available, and the old town rocked every night.

Before the days of electronic gear and microphones, Joe Raymond served as an announcer using a big megaphone and riding up and down in front of the grandstand to announce the events. A number of fellows would then pass through the crowd with a hat to take up a collection to be paid to the winner of each event.

One of the most popular features was the chariot races. The chariots were made by Bill Lewis, and wild mustangs were brought in from Nevada and hitched up four abreast to pull them. Charlie Taylor and Lou Bassett were among the hardy souls who risked life and limb to give the crowd a few thrills. Other regular performers during those rough

riding days were Lou and Ed James, Ira Ordway, Perry Smith, Porter and Charlie Underhill, Frank Parrish and Bill Zerbold.

One of Dink's specialties was the Roman ride, in which he rode standing up on two horses.

The Fourth of July parades in the early years were considerably longer than the parades put on today, according to Dink. No motors of any kind were allowed, and even all the floats were drawn by horses, mules, oxen and sometimes cows. Floats were elaborate, with weeks of preparation going into them.

A regular in the parades was Bill Lewis and his covered wagon pulled by his famous team of yoked oxen. One year Dink was riding his horse behind the team, and just ahead of the team was a small

cart with big solid wood cartwheels, pulled by an enormous red bull.

Just as the group rounded the corner of Main and Commercial Streets, some youngsters threw a handful of firecrackers into the street. Everything with four feet stampeded.

Bill Lewis managed to pull his team back under control just as they were charging through the crowd on the sidewalk. But the young man driving the small cart with the big bull, could not control his animal and it made a mad lunge for the crowd. Just then, Dink, with skilled reaction, raced up, threw his rope, and brought the frightened creature down with the crowd scrambling out of the way in all directions.

Dink became so skilled with his roping and riding he began



Dink Persico, 1926

of early rodeo days

entering other rodeos throughout the state. He leased a portion of the old Upp Ranch at the north end of the valley where he raised his own horses, and he built the first horse trailer ever seen here when he took a pair of his horses to the Salinas rodeo in 1929. There was no Golden Gate Bridge at that time, so Dink and his horses went across on the ferry. The animals remained calm during the trip, but when they got out on the streets of San Francisco, Dink says they almost twisted their heads off in astonishment, looking around at the tall buildings surrounding them — just like a pair of country bumpkins. To pull his handmade trailer to the event, Dink bought his first

brand new car from the old Laws Ford Garage which was located where the Post Office is today. He paid \$695 for it, and drove it all over northern California for the next eight years before selling it to Bill White of the local police force. Bill drove it another several years on police business during those times when members of the Police Department had to provide their own transportation. The Persico riding career almost came to an end in 1927 when Dink was seriously injured in an accident. He had stopped in at Deed Wimmer's slaughterhouse one afternoon when some wild cattle broke out of their pens and started stampeding toward town. Dink took out after them, but

crossing a field, his horse stepped into a hole and turned a somersault. Dink was thrown, and his mount came down with one hoof square in the rider's face. He was taken, unconscious, to the hospital at Northwestern with most of the bones in his face broken, including his jaw. He recalls regaining consciousness with Dr. Griner and Dr. Babcock working on him, and nurse Roberta Cook gently rubbing ice on his torn lips. Ether was the only form of anesthesia then in use, and Dink has some unpleasant memories of being violently nauseated with his jaws wired shut. He was in the hospital three weeks and back on horseback in six. Six months later he was back in the rodeo arena again.



One of the last classes at the old Daughtery School on Central street, taken in 1921 just before the new grammar school (now the Grange Hall) opened. In the back row from left, John Grove, Wilbur Pullen, Elmo Reed, unidentified boy, Donald Hamilton, Lorena Cooper, Georgia Lewis, Blanch Shelton, Margaret McPhillips, Ruby Christie,

Fred Remstedt and Pearl Faxon.

Third row from left, Carrol Rowe, Evelyn Amen, Isabella Fracchia, Bertha Walker, June Bredeboft, Margarita Stefani, Esther Brayton, Yvonne Desonet, Sarah McPhillips and Voy Johnson. Second row from left, Marjorie Duncan, Maxine Carver, Cecil Hardwick, Hazel

Thurman, Lucille Carver, Pauline Ray, Dorothy Saunders, Mary Cronine, Katie Figone, Marjorie Murphy, Jack Lewis, Charley Ray and Pete Recagno. Front row from left, Francis Teale, Richard Exley, unidentified boy, Edward Carver, George Fiori, Wesley Shore, Serena Paranicino, Neddie [Bill] Baechtel.