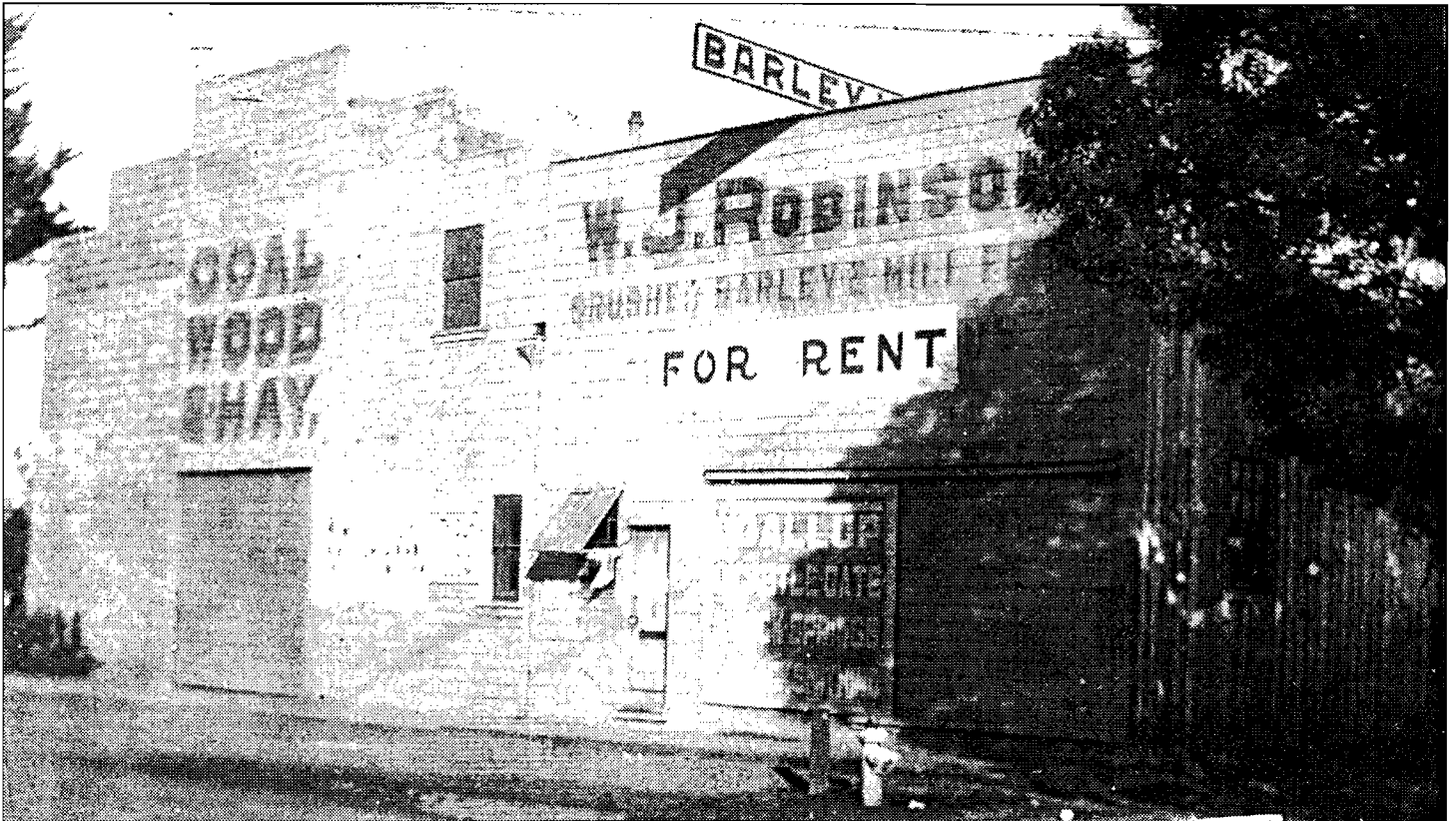


*The San Joaquin Historian*

# Robinson's Feed & Country Western Store



A Publication of the San Joaquin County  
Historical Society and Museum

Fall/Winter 2007

# The San Joaquin Historian

Semi-Annual Journal of  
The San Joaquin County Historical Society

Fall/Winter Issue 2007

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Many thanks go to *The Lodi News-Sentinel*, Christi Kennedy Weybret, Ralph Lea and Evie and Ed Olson for supplying us with all the facts and photos for this *Historian*. All photos are from the Olson's private collection.

The San Joaquin County Historical Society operates the San Joaquin County Historical Museum at Micke Grove Regional Park under an agreement with the County of San Joaquin. The Society maintains its office at the Museum.

Well researched and documented manuscripts relating to the history of San Joaquin County or the Delta will always be considered. The editor reserves the right to shorten material based on local interest and space considerations. Inquiry should be made through the Museum office.

### *On the Cover...*

*W. J. Robinson's Feed and Fuel on Stockton Street, enlarged in 1909. Moved to a bigger store on Lodi Avenue and Main Street in 1915.*

# Robinson's Feed & Country Western Store

William James Robinson was born on January 10, 1859 in San Francisco, on the exact spot where 56 years later the great Panama-Pacific Exhibition was held in 1915. His father, Francis H. Robinson, was an Indiana native who had crossed the plains to California in 1857. A year later, Robinson's wife Rebecca (née Cooper of Kentucky) sailed to Panama, crossed the isthmus and sailed into San Francisco's harbor. The family started a dairy. Francis Robinson also worked as a brick mason and laid the first brick to build Fort Point at the San Francisco Presidio. Sadly, he was killed when a brick wall fell on him. William was about ten years old and became the main support for his mother and siblings.

Following that tragedy, the Robinson family moved to Antioch in 1869. William went to school and worked in grain farming operations.



*William J. Robinson, Sr.'s wedding picture*



*Helen May Robinson's wedding picture*

At the age of twenty-seven, William married Helen May Johnson on September 30, 1886. In 1892 the couple moved to Lathrop, which was a hub of railroad activity at the time.

William worked for Southern Pacific Railroad for a time and also farmed.

Around 1900 when the railroad vision points were shifted west to Tracy, William made the decision to move away from Lathrop, as it did not seem like the town had much of a future. He wanted to go to better farm land and a community with a future. He hitched a team to his house, and pulled it across San Joaquin County to a 25-acre spread about four miles east of Lodi in the Victor area. He started a dairy and harvested grain.

William Robinson only operated the dairy and grain farm for about six years, but he was credited with starting one of the first pumping plants in the Lodi area to supply water for alfalfa. He also could see the

potential profit of the new tokay grapes and, like many growers, plowed up some grain fields and planted grapes. His grapevines were just coming to bear fruit when he sold the farm.

About 1897 German people from the Dakotas began arriving in Lodi and were eager to buy farmland. Many of them bought land in the Victor area because it was very reasonable, \$35 to \$70 per acre. They also realized how excellent the soil was for grape growing.

Albert Edgar Morden, who built one of the first homes, persuaded the railroad company to build a freight depot close to his home. He named the train depot stop after his eldest son, Victor.

Soon packing houses were built near the Victor depot to handle all the tokay grapes in the area. The first packing shed reportedly was built by Peter Heil sometime after he settled in Victor in 1905.

In 1908 the local grape growers formed the Farmers Mutual Winery as a co-operative. Two years later, Lot Lachenmaier settled in Victor with his family and built a home, a large general merchandise store and a real estate office.

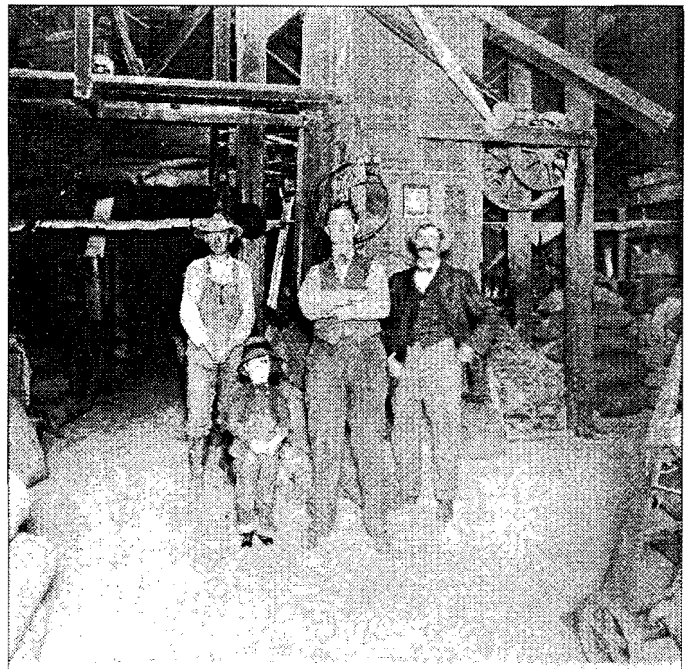
Lachenmaier and Jacob Knoll, who arrived in Victor in 1907, developed much of the community. More businesses were built, and the little community became so well established that the Victor post office opened on August 16, 1922.

In 1906, William Robinson moved his wife, daughter Bira and son Willard James to Lodi, where he purchased property on the southeast corner of Pine and Stockton streets. To the south of their home, William built a store out of Perrin Brothers cement brick and began his business known as W. J.

Robinson's Feed and Fuel.

In the beginning, the floor of the San Joaquin Valley was thousands of acres of grain, as far as the eye could see, and it was only natural that through the years, many businesses would eventually be involved in supplying the countryside with a well-milled grain product for their cattle and horses.

William James Robinson founded the Robinson Cleaning and Rolling Mill in 1906 at the corner of Stockton and Walnut Street in Lodi. Here the grain was brought into the mill, where it was processed and sacked and delivered by William James himself by horse and buggy to the ranches throughout the countryside. Even in those days horses played a large part in the development of this area. He sold feed for horses, cows, chickens and other animals, and he sold coal, the common fuel for heating homes in Lodi at the time.



*The inside of the first feed store of W. J. Robinson at the southeast corner of Pine and Stockton streets (1906-1915). W. J. Robinson in the center.*

Agriculture, from the first sowing of grain in 1848 in fields cleared of brush and scrub oak has given life to the Lodi district. Because of the rich Hanford soil, its climate and its easy access to irrigation waters and transportation, Lodi's agricultural history can be categorized into three eras. These include the grain era, the watermelon era and the tree fruit and grape era. Of all of these crops, the grape has endured and has served to further Lodi's economic and population growth.

It has been said that the soils of San Joaquin County will produce any cereal, fruit, vegetable, nut, plant or tree grown in any other climate on earth with the exception of those grown in the torrid zone.

The settlers of the area set about to prove it and at the beginning of the century crops within the county included all tree growing fruits, nuts, olives, row crops and tuber vegetables. The land was irrigated by windmill driven pumps.

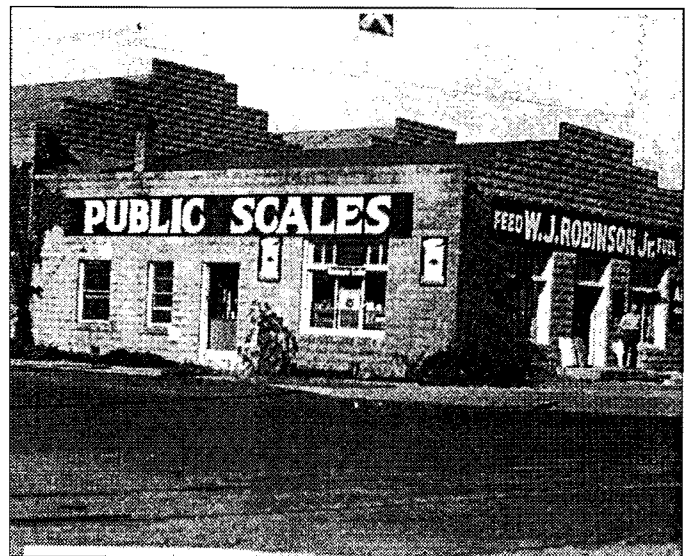
In 1900 Lodi was an established community of about 1,500 residents. The City of Lodi had recently incorporated and began to focus on the addition of utilities to serve its residents. First, natural gas and water were supplied in 1891. Electricity was added a decade later by Bay City Gas and Water Works with the installation of a light plant capable of illuminating 500 globes. By 1913, Lodi Telephone Company was providing service throughout town. In 1919, the power utility was purchased and is still municipally run today.

It also already had a library. There was a high school on the northwest corner of Lodi Avenue and Church Street. From being the "Melon Capital of the World," Lodi and surrounding area started to focus on tokay grapes.

The successful business grew. In 1914, Robinson incorporated the business and took in his son-in-law Judge E. L. Weaver and his twenty-two year-old son Willard. A year later, the business had expanded to the point more room was needed. They built the warehouse and new store at Main Street and Lodi Avenue and moved the business.

Even a church convention was held in the family's warehouse behind the feed store because it was the largest indoor meeting place in Lodi.

The new facility included the largest public scale in Lodi. It was often used until late at night during harvest time by grape trucks. All boxed grapes shipped out of Lodi had to be weighed. First, the loaded truck would drive on to the scale to be weighed, and then it would return to be weighed again after having been unloaded at the railroad. The difference in the weight gave the grower and shipper the amount of grapes being shipped out.



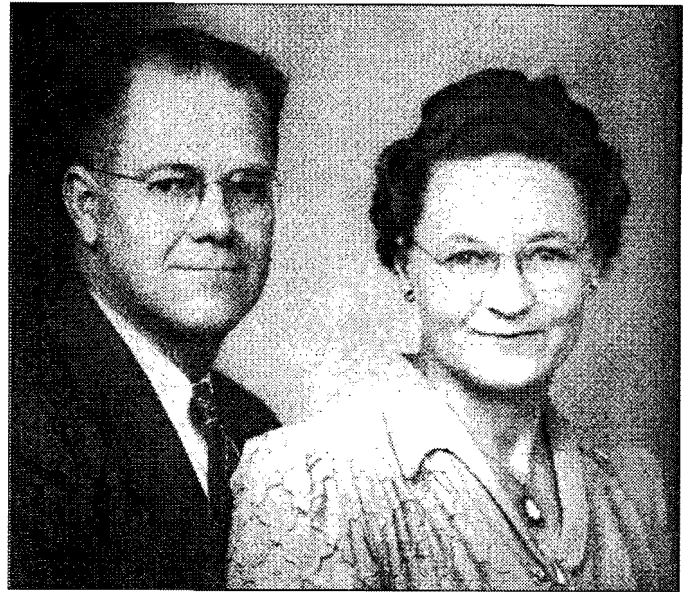
*The new facility with the scales which are still in use today*

William James had purchased a few acres of vineyard in the country to continue his operation. Part of the vineyard was removed and new block buildings built to house the milling plant and the finished product.

William James and his son Willard continued the business until the depression came along and they sold the mill, only to have it returned to them in six years. They rebuilt the business, (as it had been bankrupt at the time they took it back) and William James retired and Willard took over the reins. Willard was very capable and as times were changing, he realized it was time to make some changes for the family-owned business.

In his sixties, William Robinson stepped back from the feed business in 1919 and devoted his time to caring for his wife, Helen. She later died in 1925. In 1937, he married Bertha Richard.

On October, 1941, William Robinson died from a stroke suffered six days earlier. He was eighty-two.



*Willard and Marie Robinson at their 25<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary in 1940*

Willard Robinson continued the feed business through World War II. In 1946 he retired and turned the business over to his daughter Evelyn and her husband, Ed Olson.

Ed Olson grew up in South Dakota and was a deep sea diver at Pearl Harbor, where he salvaged sunken ships. He was employed by the Navy, but he never enlisted.

Instead, he joined the Air Force during World War II. It was while he was stationed at Stockton Field (now Stockton Metropolitan Airport) that he met Evelyn "Evie" Robinson. They married in 1944.

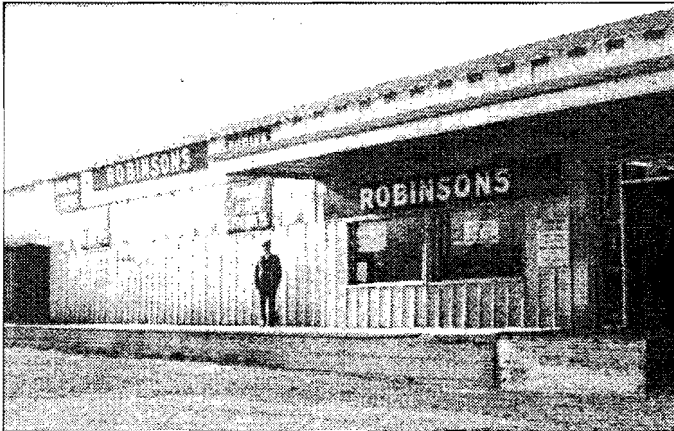
Evelyn Olson, née Robinson, told that when she grew up, Lodi Avenue was a two-lane street. One of her fondest memories was that the family's tiny fox terrier, named Foxy, used to walk every day from the Robinson home west of where Hutchins Street Square is now and across the railroad tracks all the way to the feed store at Lodi Avenue and Main Street - all by herself. That was in the late 1930's.

More Robinsons joined the business, as Ed bought the Lodi store from his father-in-law,



*Willard and Marie Robinson at their wedding on October 17, 1915*

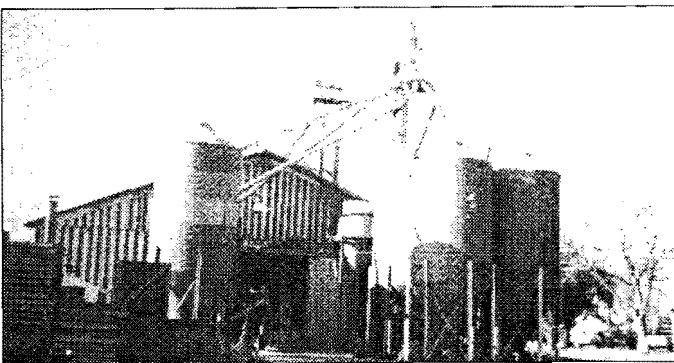
Willard and joined Evie's brother, Emory Robinson, and cousin LeRoy Weaver in running the feed store. By the late 1950's, Ed Olson ran the place himself.



*The Galt store*

Ed Olson looked for another location for the business that would save the farmers miles in their driving, and a new store was located in Galt in the late 1940's. This store prospered and another new outlet was in the making.

A store was leased in Clements in the late 1950's and with the expiration of the lease in 1961, the rent was raised too high to continue operations there, and a location was sought and purchased in Lockeford. Ed Olson purchased an old historical building built in 1894 that still had dirt floors. This building was located next to the railroad tracks, giving easy shipment by rail for the business.



*The Lockeford Mill*



*The Lockeford store*

Through the years they have remodeled the building, adding a floor first of all, and then in the early 1980's a new addition that houses the Country Western Shop. With the advent of the Lockeford purchase, the Grinder Roller operation was moved to Lockeford, and then to Collier Road where they blended to the ranchers' wishes all the different grains and combinations, and the blends that were also found in all three stores.

After his retirement, Willard Robinson served on the Lodi City Council from 1952 to 1960 and was mayor in 1955 and 1956. He was also the first president of the San Joaquin County Historical Society. *The Lodi News-Sentinel* reported the following: *Historic Group Picks Robinson. Willard Robinson, Lodi city councilman, took office as first president of the Lodi Historical Society at a combination charter night and installation dinner last night at El Charro.*

*Dr. Rockwell Hunt, retired head of the California Historical Society, served as installing officer. Taking office with Robinson were Mrs. Orrin Kettleman, vice president; Mrs. Thomas J. Carey, secretary; Mrs. Frances Dragoo, treasurer; and*

*directors Mrs. Phil Johnson, Miss Amy Boynton and Roswell Barbour.*

*Dr. Hunt told of the State Conference of California Historical Societies, formed last June, and the local group voted to join the state-wide organization which will have its convention next June in Monterey.*

*The new president was presented by Ward Gregg with a gavel Gregg had carved many years ago.*

*Speaker of the evening was Dr. J. Randolph Hutchins, recently appointed director of the California Historical Foundation at College of the Pacific, who spoke on the significance of historical records.*

*Dr. Hutchins emphasized that civilization is built on its records—from the president's papers to the grocer's price list and local bus schedule. Local history is the record of personal experience closest to people, he pointed out, placing history in perspective—something that happened right here—not far away.*

*According to Dr. Hutchins, local history is the laboratory of humanity, where people learn from past mistakes. As a hobby, it is a gathering and composition of facts. Its raw materials are the merchant's record books, the city council minutes, the utensils of current living. The speaker pointed out an attic is a dangerous place for storing the records of history. In an attic papers face the double hazards of fire and descendants who throw things away.*

By the society's sixth meeting on November 24, 1954, Mrs. Dragoo made the following motion: That the name of the Lodi District Historical Society should be changed to the Northern San Joaquin County Historical Society. Mrs. Barbour seconded this and it was passed.

The drive to serve their community must have been a family trait, because Evelyn Olson also became politically active. She served on the Lodi City Council from 1982 to 1990. She was mayor in 1983-84 and in 1987-88. She was named the Lodi Chamber of Commerce's Outstanding Citizen of the Year in 1995 and won the chamber's Athena award for woman leaders in 2006 and also received the San Joaquin County Historical Society's Golden Acorn Award for outstanding volunteerism. Evie's two stores, The Music Box in Lodi and Stockton have continuously sold tickets to the Museum's events like "Springtime on the Farm" and "Festival of Trees".

Ed Olson was an avid flyer and motorcycle rider in his younger days. He owned some 75 motorcycles during his lifetime.

Evie used to ride her own motorcycle to her music store, The Music Box, which was located at Lakewood Mall at that time.

But when she was elected to the City Council in 1982, Evie realized it would not be too dignified for a female elected official to ride a motorcycle around town, so she gave it up.



*The Robinson's store logo*



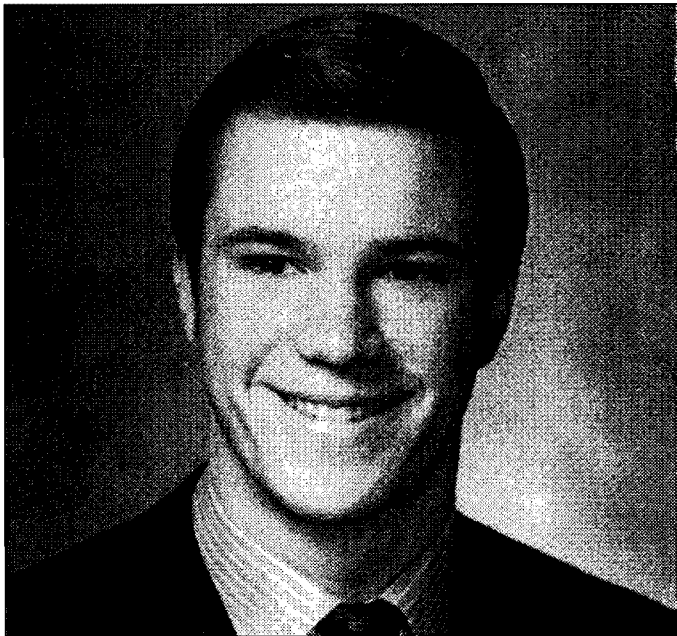
*August 19, 1984. Mayors of Lodi (From left to right): Gene Walton, 1966, Jim Pinkerton, 1974-78; T. A. Haskell, 1952; Jim Culbertson, 1960; Evelyn Olson, 1983; Bob Hunnell, 1968; Randy Snider, 1984; Wally Katnich, 1971-77-80; Bo Katzakian, 1958-62-63.*



*Evie and Ed Olson*



Rex and Susie Olson in 2006



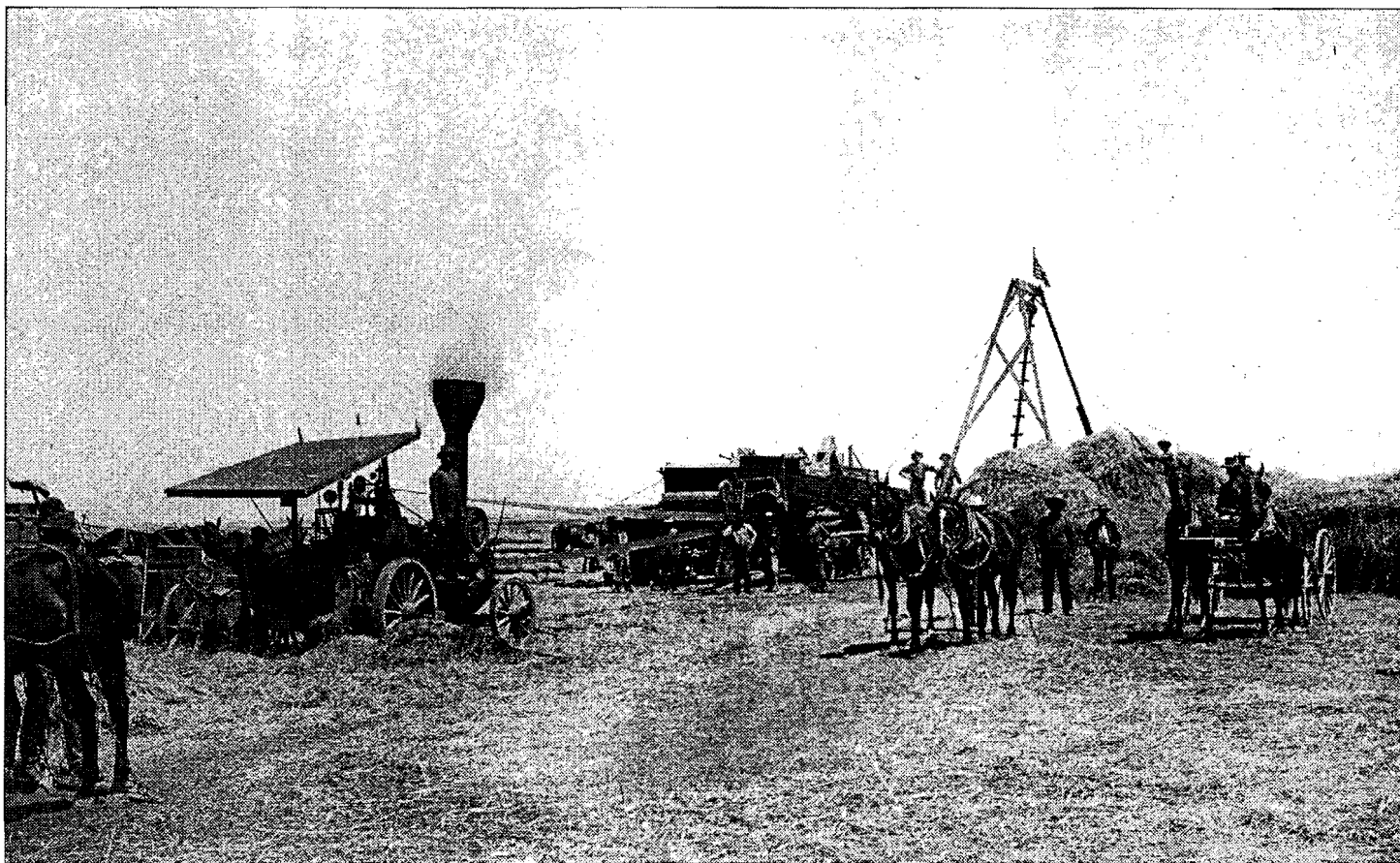
*Their son, Rex Olson*

The fourth generation is the Olson's son, Rex. He joined the store full-time after graduating from the University of California, Davis, in 1974. He is recognized for bringing the stores into the computer age and expanding its inventory beyond pet food and other supplies. Rex Olson's children Megan, Ryan and Eric also work at the Lodi store on Victor Road. Rex's wife Susie does the payroll from their home.

In the middle of the 1970's the old block building facing Lodi Avenue was torn down and a new building erected in its former location. This was the beginning of the Western Clothing Store for Robinson's in Lodi. Through the years, a full and complete line of the best in Western attire has brought a great many customers to the store. The business also branched out to sell pet foods, chicks, fish and other pet products, but customers can still find chicken feed, hay, seed, and horse medicines on the shelves.

Today, Robinson's Feed and Country Western Store has three locations: one each in Lodi, Galt, and Lockeford. The Lodi store moved in 2002 from Lodi Avenue to 1150 East Victor Road. Five generations of the Robinson family have operated the business since its beginning 101 years ago.

Evelyn Olson, William J. Robinson's granddaughter, has a treasured family heirloom photograph in a wood frame. The photo shows Robinson standing among the men, harvesters, steam threshing machine, horses and wagons working to haul in the grain on the Victor farm at the turn of the century. The words, "Nothing is accomplished without great effort," were once written on the glass covering the photo. The words are gone now, but the meaning for William J. Robinson's descendants holds true.



*Harvest crew (1895-1900). William J. Robinson, Sr., in back of horses under tripod*

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