

A Blinding Flash Can't Clear Away Clutter

By Dorothy Bowen

By now, most New Year's resolutions have passed their sell-by dates. I have, however, made a small step forward in my annual get-organized-and-eliminate-clutter resolve.

The stores have been full of plastic bins and wicker baskets for containing things which can be contained. Helpful articles abound about how to sort through and organize clutter, giving the illusion that it is indeed possible. If only it were that easy.

I should be farther along, I realize, since I experienced an epiphany of sorts some years ago. It happened this way:

I had tracked down the whereabouts of a Lamorinda pioneer, Gertrude Malette, the owner of the Moraga ranch house, since 1916, that became the estate of developer Donald Rheem, since 1934, then the abode of the Christian Brothers, 1961, and then the Moraga Hacienda de las Flores in 1973.

When I say tracked down, implying relentless research into the past, it was more like falling into a gold mine by accident.

Members of local historical societies heard of Malette from the late Brother Dennis, Saint Mary's College archivist. She and her partner, Alberta Higgins, bought a property with a modest adobe ranch house, 20 acres that was once part of Rancho Laguna de las Palos Colorados. They planned to raise Irish setters and orphans. But the social services of the day refused to let two single women become foster parents, so that never happened.

Malette was the author of children's books and a cultivated woman who spoke French, among her other accomplishments. Higgins was a nurse. Local ranchers said the two women could take a tractor apart and put it back together in no time flat.

On Christmas Eve, 1935, they left the property purchased by Donald Rheem. He added a second story, a swimming pool complete with columns and a film screening room a la Hearst Castle.

"One wonders what he needed all those bedrooms for," sniffed Malette, in a later interview.

Years went by. A neighbor on South Trail, in Orinda, told me about another neighbor, a woman in her 80s, who split logs for her wood-burning stove in the summer cottage where she lived. Her name rang a bell: Gertrude Malette.

Unfortunately, she had been felled by a stroke and hospitalized, but she was anxious to move back into her cottage.

At the same time, Vietnamese refugees were coming here, sponsored by Saint Mary's College. They spoke French. She

spoke French. They needed a home. She needed help. A perfect fit, I thought. We arranged a meeting for the families at Malette's cottage on La Madronal, on the side of a canyon surrounded by oak trees.

When we opened the front door, I began to suspect that what seemed like a perfect solution might not be. She had kept an extended family of cats, and though they were gone, their aroma remained.

In addition, she kept, apparently, every scrap of newspaper and magazine she had ever received. She was a writer, after all; they were grist for her mill. They might be useful someday. I understood perfectly.

Paths between stacks of paper led to the corner fireplace and to the kitchen where she cooked on a wood stove. Another path led to her bedroom.

The bewildered Vietnamese and the elderly settler exchanged a few polite phrases in French. But further symbiosis was not to be. They were city people. She was not.

In a blinding flash, I saw the future, my future, and resolved to reform.

But in spite of my good intentions, reformation is slow work. For the most part, my books and papers are still confined to the bookcases. The papers do not, in general, interfere with foot traffic, or if they do, only for a finite space of time.

But I have taken a small step ahead. I firmly dropped the list of New Year's resolutions in the recycling bin instead of tucking it away for future reference. It might have come in handy sometime.