

**California Pioneers of Santa Clara County
Essay Contest
2021**

The Life and Times of Gilroy Physician and Mayor

Elmer J. Chesbro, MD

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Gilroy Physician and Mayor
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Elmer J. Chesbro Dam and
Reservoir
(photo: ValleyWater.org)



The author with her grandfather
Elmer J. Chesbro and his daughter,
Dorothy Chesbro Ronald at the
dedication of the Elmer J. Chesbro
Dam, June 15, 1956

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Introduction

"Dr. Elmer Chesbro was a native of Gilroy who never stopped loving and serving his hometown. He spent a professional lifetime healing its sick and building a better environment for all.

He was a founding member of the Gilroy City Planning Commission, twice mayor of that city and a 10-year member of the City Council.

It was however as a water conservationist that his reputation spread beyond the city of Gilroy. For many years, Dr. Elmer Chesbro was chairman of the South Santa Clara County Water Conservation District. He spearheaded the campaigns that resulted in construction of Uvas dam and reservoir and a second dam and reservoir that were named, appropriately, for him.

His community will continue to benefit from his activities long after he is gone. What better monument can a man leave?"

Editorial, San Jose News, August 5, 1969

Born the second of five children into a pioneer Gilroy family, Elmer Chesbro lived a life full of both triumphs and challenges. Childhood bouts of both scarlet and rheumatic fevers left him with a weakened heart, and in his twenties the onset of macular degeneration rendered him partially blind. Of his triumphs, he never boasted, but accepted the many honors which came his way with a sense of humble gratitude.

Elmer Chesbro was my grandfather and the person I was closest to during my childhood. During World War II, when my father was serving on a naval vessel in the South Pacific, Elmer served as my *in loco parentis*, reading photo captions to me from the weekly editions of Life magazine, recounting inflated stories about his fishing trips and taking me on his many walks down to Gilroy's City Hall to visit his lifelong friend, the City Treasurer. Often in his company, I grew up learning about local politics, water and soil conservation, how to clean trout, maintain good nutritional health, and not take myself too seriously. He taught me the dance steps of his youth, whirling me around the linoleum to music from the kitchen radio. My grandfather had an impish sense of humor and loved to poke fun, as much at himself as at those whose hot air quotient had reached its limits. He could be direct and serious as well, especially on subjects close to his heart, particularly local politics and public health issues. With lasting memories of the Spanish Influenza, diphtheria, whooping cough and polio outbreaks that raged during various years of his active practice, he welcomed the new wonder drugs that alleviated infections and helped prevent epidemics. Raised in the traditions of the local Methodist Church, North, he was not a churchgoer in adulthood, but he called himself "the Methodist gardener for the Episcopal church," referring to his many hours spent pruning and planting at my grandmother's beloved St. Stephen's Church in Gilroy. His loyal and devoted memberships included Gilroy's Keith Lodge F&AM, where he was a Past Worshipful Master, the San Jose Consistory of the Scottish Rite, Commander of Gilroy's American Legion Post 217 and President of the local Kiwanis Club. He was perpetually outspoken over the waste of county water resources, and a proponent of sensible city planning in the town he called home. He was loyal and generous to both family and friends, and always, he loved and strived to protect his hometown, especially from the threat of urban sprawl.

Early Life: 1894-1917

Setting a Precedent

Elmer's father, Illinois native Heverland Rogers Chesbro, MD had arrived in Gilroy in December 1883 with but two years' experience in homeopathic medical practice. He formed a partnership with well-established local physician Dr. Berryman Bryant, and within the decade took over the practice, which he maintained for the next 50 years. Heverland was also involved in dairy ranching, real estate ventures, fraternal societies, and local politics, serving three terms as Gilroy Mayor. His public commitments included Gilroy's first Board of Trade, the boards of the Gilroy Telephone Company, the Bank of Italy and the Gilroy School Board. He was instrumental in helping to establish the Gilroy Gaslight Company, promoting the city's first electrical power and sewage services and encouraging paving for its streets and sidewalks. His promotion of county and state road improvement led to the completion of Hecker Pass Highway. He and his wife Emma Wildey Chesbro had three sons, Arthur, Elmer and Donald. After Emma's 1905 death, he married local schoolteacher Lily Plunket and the couple had a daughter and a son, Marion and Wayne. Dr. Heverland Chesbo's efforts on behalf of Santa Clara County water conservation were later assumed by his son Elmer, after whom Elmer J. Chesbro Dam and Reservoir and its accompanying County Park is named.

The Second Son

Second son Elmer Jared was born in Gilroy on the night of February 11, 1894 in the family's new, well-ornamented Eastlake style home, located at 147 (now 7541) Church Street. The night was a stormy one, with winds so strong that the local Gilroy Advocate reported trees blown down all over town. "[However} morning dawned bright, clear and cold, all nature smiling in her loveliness."¹

The Chesbro home was a happy one, with regular social activities and civic involvements. Busy raising her children, Emma Chesbro described family life in a letter written on August 7, 1897 to her sister-in-law Emma Wort in Nebraska, "I said to Elmer I wouldn't get the chairs in the middle of the floor for cars until after dinner this evening, His answer was, 'Mama, if you was little like me, and had my head on, you would have played cars alright.' "

By 1900 Elmer and his older brother Arthur were attending classes at the Gilroy Public School, located at Church and Third Streets, a block away from the family home. At a population of 2,500, the town was growing, with many civic improvements within the city limits. An expanding fruit industry, seen in the apple and walnut orchards in the surrounding countryside, was served by a new fruit packing house. West of town vineyards were thriving along the hillsides.

Sadly, on March 22, 1905, eleven-year-old Elmer, nineteen-year-old Arthur and little six-year-old Donald witnessed the death of their beloved mother Emma, a victim of breast cancer. The event was one that touched Elmer deeply and permanently. His father

¹ "Stork Visits Chesbro Home," *Gilroy Advocate*, February 12, 1894

remarried a year later and within a few years two more Chesbro children, Wayne and Marion, completed the family.

Along with eleven other students, Elmer graduated from Gilroy High School in 1912. Always drawn to planting and growing, he intended to apply to the University Farm School in Davis (now the U.C. Davis College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences) to study agricultural methods, later planning a career in farming. As second son in the family, and with his father's dairy and farm acreage south of Gilroy, he anticipated the opportunity to develop a successful enterprise. But his father thought otherwise. First son Arthur had been designated to take over their father's medical practice. Instead, Arthur decided to go into banking, real estate, and insurance sales. That left Elmer with the heavy burden of following in his father's footsteps. If he wanted to pursue an education in Agronomy, his father said, he was on his own. His father only agreed to pay for Elmer's college if he chose Medicine. Whether reluctantly or not, Elmer obeyed and in August 1912 headed for Hahnemann Medical Hospital College of San Francisco, located at Sacramento and Maple Streets in the city, where he was to study Homeopathy.

Medical School Rigors

For the next four years, Elmer's academic strivings were accompanied by austerity. Always stringent with finances, his father's meager allowance provided Elmer barely enough to manage. He lived in a rented room and ate but one major meal a day. This was often at Shroeder's Beer Hall in the financial district where, for the price of a beer, one could enjoy a free buffet lunch, including sliced ham, potato salad and fresh buttered peas, all good sustenance for a struggling young man. To save on laundry bills, after having his shirts washed at a Chinese laundry, he then persuaded the owners to show him how to do his own ironing. For the rest of his life, every Saturday morning he ran his own wash load, hung it on the line, and got out the iron to press his shirts and pajamas.

Halfway through his medical studies, Elmer's planned career was thrown into jeopardy with the diagnosis of a rapid form of macular degeneration. The *Gilroy Advocate* reported, "The friends of Elmer Chesbro...regret to learn that his eyesight is troubling him considerably and it has been necessary for him to drop a number of his studies."² Ordered to do no reading and to rest his eyes completely, Elmer managed his third, frightening year of medical school with help from his friend and roommate, Bart Gattuccio, who spent hours reading the lessons out loud to him. The pair studied together and quizzed each other until Elmer's eyesight eventually stabilized. Although proceeding with a diagnosis of impaired vision for the rest of his life, he was allowed to resume a full course of medical studies and to graduate on time with his class.

San Francisco's year-long 1915 Panama-Pacific International Exposition, held to celebrate the opening of the Panama Canal and the 400th anniversary of Balboa's discovery of the Pacific Ocean, also brought excitement into Elmer's life. By then he'd met Jane Carlson, a registered nurse at Children's Hospital in San Francisco. While spending weekly half-days off work, they wandered the Expo grounds located near San Francisco Bay, fell in love and became engaged.

² "Elmer Chesbro Eyesight Threatened," *Gilroy Advocate*, October 24, 1914

The following year, Elmer passed all his medical exams and stood with the last graduating class of Hahnemann Medical College before it merged with the University of California Medical School. He received his California license to practice medicine and surgery on September 7, 1916 and began a year's residency at San Francisco City and County Hospital. After fulfilling his residency, he received his certificate of completion on June 28, 1917.

By this time, America had entered World War I. Elmer had already applied to the War Department to join the U.S. Army Medical Corps but had been turned down due to failing the eye exam during the preliminary physical. After staying on at the San Francisco Hospital for several months' additional duty in the summer of 1917, he accepted a position with the U.S. Public Health Service at the Yosemite Valley Park Service hospital. There, he would attend park employees, their families, and the few year-round civilian residents at the park.

On September 26, 1917 Elmer and Jane took the ferry across San Francisco Bay to San Rafael, where they were married by a justice of the peace at the Marin County Courthouse. The Gilroy Advocate reported the happy day,

"Dr. Chesbro has been the 'House Physician' at the City and County of San Francisco Hospital and has accepted a position as physician in the Yosemite Valley for the next few months. In this beautiful wonderland the couple will spend the next few months of their married life and we know of no more romantic spot for lovers or 'honeymooners.' His bride is a former resident of the Pajaro Valley."³

For the remainder of 1917, Jane and Elmer set up housekeeping in a small ranger cabin located on the Valley floor near Sentinel Rock. Besides his duties at the four-bed park service hospital, Elmer had to ride a mule or a horse up rough Yosemite trails to attend sick patients living in isolated cabins.

Young Adulthood: 1917-1929

Back Home Again

When Elmer's park service assignment was over, he and Jane moved to Gilroy where, as reported in the Gilroy Advocate,

"Dr. Elmer Chesbro has entered into co-partnership with his father, Dr. H.R. Chesbro. As Dr. Chesbro, Sr., has been established in Gilroy for nearly 30 years, his experience and wide acquaintances are a valuable acquisition to the young man just starting."⁴

³ "Gilroy Boy Weds," *Gilroy Advocate*, October 6, 1917

⁴ "Joins Family Practice," *Gilroy Advocate*, December 29, 1917

Although as a qualified physician, Elmer could diagnose, treat, and take general care of patients, including maternity cases and setting broken bones, he was precluded from performing major surgery beyond superficial cases, such as removing moles, warts and splinters or sewing up wounds. For the rest of his life, his major surgery cases had to be referred to a fellow doctor.

Even though Elmer was now settled into a new and permanent job as a Gilroy physician, America was fighting overseas, and young men were being called to serve. Accordingly, a year and a half after being turned down by the War Department due to poor eyesight, he applied again, enlisting as a private, U.S. Army Medical Corps. He was inducted into the United States Army on August 13, 1918 at Ft. McDowell, Angel Island, San Francisco. He had accomplished this by memorizing all the available eye charts that he had access to in his regular medical practice, thus fooling the Army Medical Examiner into passing his eye exam.

Before long, he was aboard a troop train headed across the continent to Motor Unit No. 14, Medical Department, Camp Macon, Georgia, soon reassigned to Ft. Oglethorpe, Georgia. However, moved once more to Camp Greenleaf, Georgia, a fellow physician noticed Elmer's attempts to read the patients' charts by holding the reports very close to the corner of his eye in order to see the print. After being subjected to a new eye chart exam, one which he hadn't memorized, Elmer failed and was told he would have to leave the service. He was due to be honorably discharged on September 24, 1918, the official paperwork stating, "choric retinitis, chronic, macular region, bilateral." In the meantime, a measles and Spanish Influenza epidemic was sweeping the Army camps. In need of all the help they could summon, the authorities managed to "lose" his discharge papers. He spent several additional weeks helping the overburdened staff at the camp, where sick soldiers lay on cots in makeshift outdoor hospital tents. In a letter to his father dated October 5, 1918, he wrote,

"The work at our new station is fine. Several lecture courses such as bacteriology, hygiene and the like, also practical work. The eats here are very good and the treatment fine. At present the epidemic is running riot in his section. Our hospital is running at full blast. Most cases run a temp of 101°-103° and sick from 5-10 days. Personally, I have felt fine and hope to keep so because I want to get started West, the sooner the quicker, as long as it is to be."

Elmer finally left the Army on October 16, 1918 and headed for Gilroy the next day. Before boarding the train at Camp Forrest, Georgia, he received mustering out pay in the amount of \$119.27.

For the remainder of 1918 he was assigned to Public Health Service duty, attending Spanish Influenza cases in Gilroy, then at a Coast Guard unit at Point Reyes, and finally in Madera. At last, back home by the end of December 1918, Elmer resumed medical practice with his father and rejoined Jane, who had recently returned from several months' relief nursing at Children's Hospital in San Francisco.

Based on his five weeks' duty in the U.S. Army, Elmer applied for, and was accorded, a World War I Victory Medal. He kept it all his life, in its velvet-lined presentation box. Never forgetting his patriotic duties, and his time in the service, Elmer became a founding,

lifelong member and Post Commander, of Gilroy's American Legion Post 217, chartered on June 10, 1921. During the years of his medical practice, he served as the local California National Guard Medical Examiner and during World War II he was the examiner for the local Induction Board.

The Family Practice

By the end of December 1919, the Spanish Influenza epidemic had finally come to a halt. Along with other local doctors Elmer served on the Red Cross Home Service Committee, working to settle bills incurred during the maintenance of Gilroy's makeshift emergency hospitals. As Gilroy only had one small private hospital, other sickbeds had been set up in the Methodist Church Sunday School rooms, as well as in private homes. By this time Elmer and Jane had a two-month-old daughter, Dorothy Jane, born on September 30, 1919, and had moved into their first home, a cottage located at 385 (now 7785) Eagleberry St. Immediately thrust into the family medical practice, he was heavily burdened by his father, who paid him \$17.00 per week, gave him all the late-night calls and management of home obstetric deliveries.

Further serving his community, in 1920 Elmer threw his hat into the local ring and was elected Gilroy City Councilman, being reelected three more times and serving until 1930. During this time, he also served on the Board of Directors of the Gilroy Telephone Company, on the City Water Committee (1927-30) and as City Health Officer (1930-31).

As Elmer watched Santa Clara County's agricultural growth expand into orchards and spreading farmlands, he became interested in soil and water conservation. As a ranch owner himself by this time, with acreage along Bolsa Road south of Gilroy, he was intensely aware of topsoil and crop damage due to flooding. Over the next decades he would compile his own list of statistics on flooding, runoff, topsoil losses and creek impaction.

By the end of the 1920s, Gilroy was growing but still had no public hospital. Facilities were limited at Dr. Jonas and Dr. John Clark's private hospital, which could handle routine emergencies, maternity cases, appendectomies, gunshot wounds and fractures. More severe injuries and major surgeries had to be transported all the way to San Jose for treatment. Beginning in 1926 and continuing until July 1929, when Wheeler Hospital opened, Elmer worked with three other local physicians: John Clark, Roland Prien, Hugo Schmitt and local philanthropist Lin Wheeler to encourage fund drives to build the new two-winged structure. At 10,144 square feet, the new facility held major and minor surgery units, an emergency room, a maternity ward and nursery, a two-story central section with offices on the main floor and nurses' quarters upstairs. For patients, there were 24 private and semi-private rooms, many with full private baths. The William Weeks-designed hospital was formally dedicated on July 27, 1929. For his role in the hospital's founding, the Elmer J. Chesbro, M.D. Medical Library was later dedicated at the hospital in his honor.

The Mid-Life Years: 1930-1940

Mayoral Duties

Elmer ran for and was elected Gilroy Mayor in 1932. The Gilroy Advocate noted,

"Dr. Elmer J. Chesbro, local physician and former member of the of the city council...has proved himself to be unusually thorough in all his public service and his many friends are confident that his term of office will be marked by a sincere effort to keep Gilroy in the front rank of progressive cities."⁵

When he took office, the new mayor announced that a focus of his program would be to reduce operating expenses of the city government without interfering with its general efficiency. The Gilroy Advocate noted,

"Through his service as councilman has a practical insight into the needs of this city and the citizens are confident that he will be successful in putting his plans into effect. There is present a deficit in the city treasury, and the new administration is fortunate in having Mayor Chesbro as their leader."⁶

Growing vice problems in south Santa Clara county addressed not only illegal gambling but also the proliferation of slot machines, still considered legal at the time. Fan tan parlors and backroom gambling dens were numerous along Gilroy's south Monterey Street, known as Chinatown. Numerous sheriff raids took place over the years, but with little result. Finally, according to the July 5, 1935 Gilroy Advocate, Mayor Chesbro banned all slot machines that paid cash and ordered Marshall Walter White to follow with a letter from District Attorney Fred Thomas, who declared the devices illegal. Merchandise vending machines and certain types of marble games were allowed to remain for the time being, with the city's Treasurer to collect taxes on legal slots. The cash paying machines were given 3 days to be removed.⁷ Despite occasional sheriff raids, slot machine use continued in the Gilroy area until 1940.

Upon taking office, Elmer had noted that Gilroy's water supply was not adequate to the needs of the community and that a new well would help reduce the fear of shortage. the issue was addressed, according to the January 3, 1934, Gilroy Advocate, when the town learned that, thanks to Mayor Chesbro and the United States Government, the city would be receiving a 12,700-foot replacement of the old 12-inch to 14-inch municipal main water pipe. The Public Works Administration agreed to allot the sum of \$30,000 to help improve the system that led from the city limits at Hanna Street, out First Street and Hecker Pass Highway, to the municipal reservoir at the city's golf course. At 16 inches, the new conduit would hold a greater and more efficient carrying capacity. A local bond election made up the difference in the pipe laying costs and the two month-long job offered much needed employment to 40 local workers.

⁵ Editorial, *Gilroy Advocate*, May 6, 1932

⁶ Editorial, *Gilroy Advocate*, June 10, 1932

⁷ "Gilroy to Ban Slot Machines," *Gilroy Advocate*, July 5, 1935

When the project was completed, the city of Gilroy found it had not spent all of the monies granted. Accordingly, excess funds amounting to \$1,500. were returned to the federal government. A United Press wire service report of the unusual gesture made it as far as the Elgin, Illinois *Courier*. A letter to Elmer from A.R. Hausmann, Assistant Pacific Coast Manager of the United States Pipe and Foundry Company of San Francisco, dated September 25, 1935, sent him the editorial. The clipping had been forwarded to him from the firm's Chicago office. In it, the September 14, 1935, Elgin newspaper noted:

"Let us hope that the recording angel ever alert for good deeds in a naughty world, failed not to record the singular virtue displayed by the municipality of Gilroy, Cal. Gilroy undertook to install a public improvement-something having to do with waterworks-and got a \$30,000 advance from the PWA for the purpose. Contracts were let and workmen were hired, and when everything was finished Gilroy discovered that the work had been done for about 5 per cent less than the estimated cost-and the surplus was sent back to the federal authorities. PWA officials themselves say that Gilroy is the only city in the country which actually finished a PWA job for less than estimates and returned the savings to Uncle Sam. At a time when most cities look on Uncle Sam as Santa Claus' grandfather, this example of municipal honesty ought not to go unnoticed."

A Chesbro family anecdote at the time was recorded by his daughter, Dorothy,

"Papa was coming up from Los Angeles on the train and in the washroom some man asked him where he was going. He replied that he would get off at Gilroy. The man asked Papa if he knew the Mayor there, and he said yes, he did. The man said he'd read about the return of the PWA funds and wished he could shake the mayor's hand and tell him what a fine thing he had done. Papa said he'd mention it to the mayor next time he saw him. And with that, the Mayor got off the train at Gilroy!"⁸

Reelected in 1934, Elmer continued with his budgeted, cost-cutting agenda. When he first took office, the city of Gilroy had been in debt, but by the end of his second term, the city not only had an excess of funds in its treasury, but local taxes had also been lowered by an impressive 20 per cent.

Upon completion of his second and final mayoral term, the Gilroy Evening Dispatch recounted Mayor Chesbro's accomplishments. The Great Depression by this period had hit city, county, state and federal government coffers and Gilroy had been no exception. The editorial noted that when he left office, Mayor Chesbro had not only left the city solvent but with a substantial margin of over \$20,000,

"Only Mayor Chesbro and the Councilmen who aided him through the period of depression, enforcing a policy of businesslike economy and efficiency in civic affairs, realize what an uphill battle had to be fought to carry Gilroy's

⁸ Oral interview, Dorothy Chesbro Ronald with Elmer Chesbro, March 25-27, 1967

municipal financial burdens over the top of the hill...Gilroy is assured of furtherance of the policy of business and economy and the efficient management that has made our town outstanding in the municipal subdivisions of the State. To Mayor Elmer J. Chesbro goes a laurel wreath, but knowing him as we do, we know he'd be the first to blush and grin if anyone attempted to place it on that shiny brow of his. "⁹

Growing Water Concerns

By 1930 concerns had developed over lowering water levels in south Santa Clara County, where 3/5 of the water came from the Uvas Creek and 2/5 from the Llagas Creek. There were growing fears over the viability of the underground water reserves. The yearly draft on the valley's aquifer had begun to exceed replenishment brought on by heavy reliance on irrigation water to supply the burgeoning fruit and vegetable industry. Storage dams and percolating works were needed to collect water to restore the valley's water levels. In June 1934 a water-saving proposition for Santa Clara Valley had won at the polls in a special election, however for South County, the project primarily benefitted residents to the north.

In response, a month later, a group of citizens and ranchers sponsored an election to form the South Santa Clara County Water Conservation District. Professor Frank Adams, a conservation expert from the University of California, advised on project's feasibility. A dam, he urged, would conserve the wastewater that flowed to the sea in winter, yet would not impinge on the riparian rights of landowners living along the Uvas and Llagas Creeks.

By September, active steps were taken to circulate a petition to form a district. An editorial in the *Gilroy Advocate* urged voters to sign the petition, noting that, if measures were not enacted soon, farmers in the rich agricultural area would have no dependable irrigation supply.

A major water table issue dealt with diverting the Uvas Creek waters into the Llagas. The Llagas Creek had 5 miles of percolation bed but ran only once every four years. By contrast, even though the Uvas ran seasonally, it had only one mile of creek bed in percolation and the rest in hardpan, thus the enormous annual water loss to the ocean. The formation of a separate water district for South County, stretching south from Cochrane Road to the San Benito County line, would give the district the power to authorize water feasibility studies.

Despite strenuous opposition from some landowners, the County Board of Supervisors decided a special election would enable South County voters to decide, on January 22, 1935, whether to form the separate district, tentatively named South Santa Clara Valley Water Conservation District.

"No more important issue has ever been presented here to those who expect to continue to make their homes here. Everyone, whether a rural resident or a city dweller, will be vitally affected by, and should of necessity be deeply interested in, the proper determination of this question, " the *Gilroy Advocate* advised.¹⁰

⁹ Editorial, *Gilroy Evening Dispatch*, June 3, 1936

¹⁰ Editorial, *Gilroy Advocate*, January 4, 1935

The growing lack of a reliable water source had also caused a decline in local land values. According to the Gilroy Advocate Editor, the lack of a conservation district also meant that the Federal Land Bank system had ceased to make any loans in the valley for the previous three years and had only re-entered the area after great pressure from the Farm Credit Administration, and then only in exceptional cases where the water supply seemed adequate.

Despite all the public urgings to vote for a separate water district, the water survey plan was at first turned down and it would be three more years before formation of a water district for south county was at last seriously under discussion.

In July 1938 a special election at last resulted in the formation of the South Santa Clara Valley Water Conservation District. The new board of directors, under Elmer Chesbro as president, was tasked to make a study and submit recommendations as to how wastewater running into the ocean could be put into an underground strata to protect the water supply in wells for irrigating local crops. The September 14, 1939 Gilroy Advocate reported that Dr. Elmer Chesbro was seeking appropriations for South Santa Clara Valley Water Conservation District's seeking legal rights for appropriation of Uvas water for diversion to the Llagas to eventually replace underground water table with surplus water. Organization of the new district was based on a plan first submitted in 1921 by Fred Tibbets whose firm later became Blackie and Wood, district engineers for eventual dam construction in south Santa Clara County. This was the beginning of a long road toward a successful water resupply outcome for the residents of South County.

After leaving public office in 1936, Elmer continued to spark public discussion on water storage issues and to promote flood control and soil conservation. Over the years he frequently visited flooded regions in the south county area, inspecting creeks damaged after heavy rains. During this period, he became a founding member of the Gilroy Planning Commission, from its beginning in 1937 and served as its Chairman from 1938 until 1960.

He continued in active medical practice, by then adding his youngest brother, Dr. Wayne Chesbro, who joined him in partnership in 1935. During the Depression years, cash-strapped patients often paid their doctor's bills by barter, exchanging produce and dairy products for medical treatment. Sometimes during those lean years, Elmer ended up treating his neediest patients for free.

The Later Years 1940-1969

The War Years and After

During World War II with the town's younger doctors called to active duty, Elmer remained as one of four doctors practicing on the home front in Gilroy. He was available to answer house calls twenty-four hours a day. His home at 495 Fifth Street was only a block from Wheeler Hospital and twice a day he walked over to check on patients. With a practice largely consisting of women and children, he delivered many Gilroy babies during this period. He served his community as well, using his background in World War I Public Health Service to work in the relief effort as Casualty Director of Gilroy's Civil Defense Unit. He also served for three wartime years as Medical Examiner for the Induction Board. With

her own World War I-era hospital training, his wife Jane also volunteered as a disaster relief services nurse with the local Red Cross.

Once the war drew to a close, Elmer joined with two other Gilroy veterans to form a War Memorial Committee. As proud members of American Legion Post 217, the men planned a fund-raising campaign and grants appeal to purchase a lot on the corner of Sixth and Egleberry Streets for the purpose of founding a community Veterans Building. Completed in 1951, the building continues to offer local veterans and their families a welcoming place to gather for meetings and reunions.

In 1945 Elmer's brother Wayne returned from overseas Naval duty and rejoined the family practice. Thinking he would turn over the practice solely to his youngest brother, Elmer began to plan for his own retirement. However, after Wayne departed in 1948 to start a practice in Berkeley, Elmer retired and thus spelled the end of the 65-year Chesbro family practice that had been founded by their father in 1883.

An Active Retirement

From 1949 on, Elmer devoted himself to other important interests in his life, two of them farming and soil conservation. Never forgetting his early life desire to attend the University Farm School at Davis, he cultivated his Bolsa Road farmland in orchard and produce, paying careful attention to constant soil improvement. In later years, he leased out his farmland to the Spreckels Sugar Beet Company and later, along with many other local farmers, he grew the now-world famous Gilroy garlic for the August Gubser Company. Of those productive, growing years, he always joked that he made more money in farming than he ever had in practicing medicine. He also found time to cultivate his Victory Garden, located on a separate lot near his house. He maintained the garden, with its fruit trees, berry patch, vegetable rows and gladiolus beds, from 1944-1965. He sold his prize gladioli to a local floral shop during those years, enjoying his small sideline "business."

Although retired from active private medical practice, he studied for and received additional medical licensing in Anesthesiology and from 1950 -1962 administered anesthetics to surgery patients at Wheeler Hospital. During this period he also served as President of the Wheeler Hospital Medical Staff.

Focused on Water Issues

Elmer's major post-retirement focus turned to a long-uncompleted issue, planning an adequate county water storage system that would provide a sufficient supply to meet future needs for South County's growing postwar population. In April 1946 he spoke to the Farm Bureau Center of Gilroy on the need for a dam on the Llagas Creek to capture flood season stream flow and to replenish underground supplies. The group was unanimous in supporting his recommendations on water conservation. Nonetheless, in 1947 despite heavy urgings by supporters, a local bond election for a dam was defeated. By 1951 water shortage in South Santa Clara County was so acute the public appeared ready to accept the idea of a water storage system and in 1952 bond issues carried the election.

Work over the next several years proceeded on both the Llagas and Uvas dams. The Llagas Dam and reservoir, located on Llagas Creek three miles west of Morgan Hill, was completed in 1955. It holds a storage capacity of 7,945 acre-feet of water and surface area

of 283 acres. The Uvas Dam and reservoir, located west of San Martin about two miles upstream from the intersection of Uvas and Watsonville Roads, was completed in 1957 and holds a capacity of 9,835 acre-feet with a surface area of 288 acres.¹¹

The Greatest Achievement

The greatest achievement of Elmer's life came in June 1956 with the dedication of the Llagas Dam, which was named in his honor as the Elmer J. Chesbro Dam. Assemblyman Bruce Allan paid tribute to him and to the men who conceived and built the vital water storage reservoir. As reported in the *Gilroy Evening Dispatch*,

"Dr. Chesbro reviewed the history of the Llagas Creek project from the time it was conceived until its fruition Sunday with the dedication. Despite efforts beginning in 1936, Dr. Chesbro said, actual progress on the dam idea was nil until in 1952, when the Farm Bureau and the Grange threw their powerful weight behind it. The district, which had been formed with an eye to conservation efforts for 17,000 acres, was doubled to 35,000 acres, and while the dam itself was 'probably saves but little water, at least now none of it is lost, for it percolates into the valley and wells are full.' He declared that the dam will contribute mightily to the welfare of the people of the valley, and is just one of the conservation projects which will keep southern Santa Clara Valley productive for many years to come."¹²

In the years since, Chesbro Dam has also become a popular 232-acre county park that offers limited fishing, picnicking and hiking activities, although swimming and boating are not permitted in the reservoir itself.

The Later Years

To pursue and substantiate his ongoing promotion of adequate flood control measures in South Santa Clara County, Elmer continued to conduct on-site inspections, study aerial photographs and keep meticulous records demonstrating rainfall and flood cycles that showed decades of droughts and decades of floods.

Seeing the postwar population surge in his community, rapid growth that threatened to strain city resources, he promoted financing of adequate storm drain protection for Gilroy.¹³ He was outspoken in his opposition of strip annexations in the city, noting that the city needed to plan first for new sewer trunk lines to be installed before further annexations should be considered.¹⁴

To help guard against soil erosion, he spearheaded the organization of work crews to clean debris from creek beds. One such project was featured in a 1957 *San Jose Mercury*

¹¹ Valley Water: Local Dams and Reservoirs <https://www.valleywater.org/your-water/local-dams-and-reservoirs>, accessed 28 April 2021

¹² "Chesbro Dam is Dedicated," *Gilroy Evening Dispatch*, June 18, 1956

¹³ "Gilroy Flood Control Problems Easing," *Gilroy Evening Dispatch*, February 8, 1960

¹⁴ "Gilroy Planner Hits Strip Annexations," *Gilroy Evening Dispatch*, December 24, 1959

article describing an \$82,000 federally funded channel clearing project to stop flooding on farmlands along the upper Pajaro River in Santa Clara and San Benito counties, a measure that would avert future flood damage to farmlands.¹⁵

The Gilroy Dispatch also reported on the project,

"It is hoped by clearing the trees in the channel, that the stream will take its proper course and although the rate of fall is small and the water meanders most of the time, Dr. Chesbro and the Army engineers feel that within four months the work will virtually eliminate flooding of the upper Pajaro and the rich lands in Santa Clara and San Benito counties."¹⁶

Never one to rest on his laurels, over the latter part of his life Elmer's county service included four months on the Santa Clara County Health and Welfare Commission and five years on the Water Advisory Committee to the Board of Supervisors. He was elected to the Supervisors Advisory Committee on Water Cooperation, and from 1954 until the end of his life he served on the Santa Clara County Flood Control and Water Conservation Commission. During later life he also served nine years on the San Felipe Soil Conservation District and was Chairman and member of the South Santa Clara Valley Water Conservation District from 1938 until his death.

Locally, from 1947 and until it was sold, he served as Chairman of the Board of the Gilroy Telephone Company, an enterprise his father had helped to found. He was always proud that under his leadership, Gilroy became the first town west of the Mississippi to have direct dial long distance telephone service. He also served for many years as Chairman of the Mason's and Odd Fellow's (now Gabilan Hills) Cemetery in Gilroy.

Three years before his death, Elmer was still working on county water issues when the heads of Santa Clara County's three major water districts met in an historic session. The Board of Supervisors, which ran the County Flood Control and Water District, held an unprecedented meeting with directors of the Santa Clara Valley Water Conservation District and the South Santa Clara Valley Water Conservation District. This meeting was the first step toward endorsing the merger of the separate entities into the formation of one giant superagency. When consolidated, and ratified by vote, the merger would place under one huge water authority a \$42,050,000 intra-county distribution system, water importation through the \$90 million Pacheco Pass Tunnel, and the \$50 million South Bay Aqueduct, 10 reservoirs and numerous flood control projects.¹⁷

When queried by reporters to predict the meeting's eventual outcome, Dr. Elmer Chesbro said, "There isn't any problem men of good will can't work out."¹⁸

¹⁵ "The Pajaro Gets a Clean-Up," *San Jose Mercury-News*, August 25, 1957

¹⁶ "Pajaro River Flood Project Underway," *Gilroy Evening Dispatch*, July 1, 1957

¹⁷ "County Water Districts Take First Step Toward Merger," *San Jose Mercury-News*, October 26, 1966.

¹⁸ *ibid.*

The End

Elmer's childhood bouts of rheumatic and scarlet fevers that had permanently damaged his aorta caught up with him and he died at Gilroy's Wheeler Hospital on August 1, 1969.

The San Jose Mercury enumerated his many accomplishments,

"The entire South Santa Clara Valley will mourn deeply his passing. A native of Gilroy, Dr. Chesbro devoted his life to the people of his hometown, treating their illnesses, working to build a better place for them to live. He was a founding member of the Gilroy City Planning Commission, a two-term mayor of Gilroy and a 10-year member of the City Council.

It was, perhaps as a water conservationist that he was best known outside of Gilroy. He was for many years chairman of the board of the South Santa Clara Valley Water Conservation District and spearheaded the drives that built Uvas dam and reservoir and-appropriately-the dam and reservoir that bear his name.

*Dr. Elmer J. Chesbro made his life count. Those who knew him will miss him. A great many who never knew him will remain, nonetheless, in his debt."*¹⁹

Afterword

During his lifetime, my grandfather witnessed great changes in the world. Early in his teenage years, he transitioned from horse and buggy travel to driving his father's 1907 Ford, humorously called "the second car in Gilroy" because a friend had beaten his Dad to the first one in town. In 1969, at the end of his life, as Elmer lay in bed at Wheeler hospital, he learned that the United States had landed a man on the moon.

Despite all of his honors and tributes, he remained a humble and approachable man, enjoying numerous friendships while never suffering fools lightly. One of my favorite memories of his wily sense of humor dates to 1952. A heated and much debated water bond issue, one intended to help fund the building of the Uvas and Llagas dams, was about to come up for a vote. At the time, a brash young reporter from the San Jose Mercury kept hounding him for news stories. Seeking to score a scoop, he phoned him at his home and asked pushy questions, intending to spark a controversial response. After my grandfather told the newsman he'd interrupted one dinnertime too many and to stop calling, the novice got in his car and drove to Gilroy. He pulled up in front of the house, got out and walked up to my grandfather, who was clad in his old gardening clothes, busily mowing the front lawn. "Excuse me, do you know where Dr. Chesbro is?" the reported asked. "Nope," my grandfather answered. "I'm just the gardener."

¹⁹ "Dr. Elmer Chesbro Will Be Missed," *San Jose Mercury-News*, August 5, 1969

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