

THE
ANNE
T.
KENT
CALIFORNIA
ROOM

MARIN
COUNTY
FREE
LIBRARY

California Room
979.462 Sitchler
Sitchler, Helen
The Indians, Don Murphy
and me : a local history
31111023850611

THE INDIANS, DON MURPHY AND ME

A Local History

by

Helen Sitchler

OUR SANTA VENETIA

Lets go back to the beginning for a minute. Remember the Marin Indians? Right here in our valley there were berries to eat, squirrels to trap, and deer and elk in the hills, and fish from the bay. And then this good food had to be carried in baskets or on poles back to camp. Where do you think the Miwok Indians might have camped around here? Most of this nice flat land where our homes are now was swampy long ago. And where did Don Timoteo Murphy have his rancho? On a low hill overlooking his vast ranch lands? Or nestled in a valley, protected from the weather? Remember his land grant was called La Punta De San Pedro y Santa Margarita y Las Gallinas. After Murphy died part of his land went to his brother, Matnew, part of it went to his nephew, Lucas, and part was sold to pay off old debts. In 1856 the area to be called Santa Venetia was sold for deliquient taxes for only \$127.60. This is a 10 mile stretch from U.S. 101 to Marina Boulevard on the south fork of Las Gallinas Creek.

In 1887, Henry Campbell bought a part of the property. It was to be known as "the golf course" until 1907. The property adjoining this was bought by E.C. Stetson, a lawyer from San Francisco. A few years later he bought more property from Edwin Kimball who had planned to establish a stock ranch. So now Stetson owned what we call Northbridge (including the Santa Venetia Middle School property) and land on the other side of the road now owned by the Jewish Church, the Catholic Church and the Rafael Convalescent Hospital. The memories of Meriam Stetson (as a boy) give us a good picture of life here in 1900. (By the way, Meriam died only a few years ago - so this is not such "old" history.)

Little Meriam Stetson was only 1 1/2 years old when his family moved here from San Francisco. They moved into the old Rose house (Built by Overnred Rose, who had sought his fortune in gold "in these hills". The gold was of a poor grade and he did not stay.) Today the old home is the YMCA Center right along San Pedro Road. Do you know it? Well, in 1890 when the Stetsons moved here there was no gas, no electricity, no telephone and even no mail delivery. Water was pumped by windmill from a well. The house was lit by candles and kerosene lamps at night. The Stetsons had cows and chickens. They made their own butter. A fruit orchard and small vegetable garden supplied some fresh produce. What a paradise for a small boy to play in! Although they had a cook and a man for outdoor work, I am sure there were jobs to be done as Meriam grew older. His father left for work each morning at 7:15. He drove to San Rafael by horse and buggy. There he took a ferry to Tiburon, then another ferry from there to San Francisco. How long do you think it took him to get there? There was school for the Santa Venetia children only when there were enough families with children living here to warrent the hiring of a teacher. And then someone had the honor of having the schoolteacher live at their home! Meriam ended his school years at San Rafael High. He rode in with his father in the morning but walked home - probably over the fields and hills.

The Stetson family lived here for a long time. Gradually the area had more homes and families. There was a lumber yard. The Romilard Kiln was here. In the early 1900's bricks were made at the Larkspur and Santa Venetia kilns. The clay found here was of a good quality. Some were sent by scow schooner to San Francisco

to help make the Palace Hotel - a really grand hotel.

The next big change in Santa Venetia came in 1914. A William McAlestar bought a large piece of the Murphy property in 1858. When he died in 1902, the property went to his widow and 2 daughters. One of the daughters was married to a man named Mabry McMahan (pronounced Mc May-hen). He was a realtor and in 1914 he had a dream. Most of the property was on the hillside and so he filled in some of the marshland and his "dream" took shape. He would create a "modern day" Venice with canals, archways, boulevards and a \$250,000 hotel. There would be 3 miles of canal (to be held by concrete walls) and 6 miles of levees. Thousands of tropical plants were brought in. This was to be the Garden Spot of the West. (The area to be developed was by the now 7-11 Store, Meadow Avenue and Adrian Way. The lovely hotel and waterfall were to be on Santa Margarita Island.) McMahan's dream was well received by the people of his day. Important people from our state capital in Sacramento endorsed it. John McLaren, Superintendent of Golden Gate Park, was in charge of landscape and planting. Opening day for the project was November 14, 1914. Over 3,000 people came. They viewed his plans, rode horseback on the bridal trails and floated on gondolas - brought from Venice, Italy - on the canals. Doesn't it sound grand? Right here in our neighborhood! But what happened? First, our country entered World War I and everyone joined in defense work. Second, came the Depression of the 1930's. With so many out of work no one bought his homes. The dream was a disappointment. Today we have only the street of Mabry (his name), Vendola, and Adrian, (his son's name) and the cracked concrete walls along Gallinas Creek. And the memories of yesteryear.

Another dream that did not prosper was that of a religious group who started a health camp in Santa Venetia. They lived in tents and ate only cereal and nuts.

By 1947 Santa Venetia was quite a little community. The Marin County Airport was on the property between Adrian Way and North San Pedro Road (where the old shopping center was). It had space for many private planes and was popular with those needing lessons to fly. Captain Wentz was active in the community - lending his building for meetings and parties. We had an Improvement Association with 114 families belonging. They were concerned with such matters as airport noise, a volunteer fire department, with water lines and street lights. A fire whistle was decided upon - 1 long blast meant a fire at the Golf Links area - 2 short blasts meant the airport. All residents were to turn off their water at the sound of the whistle. The water pressure was so low it took almost 2 hours to fill a gallon jug. What would happen if water was needed for a fire? The Improvement Association began inquiries regarding a proper crossing of Highway 101. If a resident wanted to cross the highway to go into San Rafael, he had to wait until a space in the traffic, then quickly pull out into the road. (It took 5 years of hard work by this committee before the State constructed a proper underpass such as we know now, H.E. Granlee was chairman of this committee for a time. Do you know where Granlee Road is?) A request was made for home mail delivery. The Post Office at San Rafael sent an official out to instruct the residents on the proper type of mail box to buy.

The Stetson family sold the Northbridge section of their property. (The main street into this housing section is called ~~Merlan~~ Drive.) No longer would morning and evening drivers have to

stop and allow the cattle to cross the road from the barn to the grazing field. A school was to be built on land purchased from Mrs. Stetson. Until now the children rode a bus into San Rafael for classes. The new school would have 6 rooms and a kindergarden and a multi-purpose room. After much discussion the name Santa Venetia Primary School was decided upon. Now we know of it as Santa Venetia Middle School. - and it is much bigger. The school was a community event. Local men offered their time and equipment to cut down trees and remove the stumps. On November 11, 1951 the school was dedicated with Boy Scout Troop #30 and the school children participating. It was a pleasant school with each class door painted a different color.

The business community included Santa Venetia Super Market, Tarrant Realty Company (on the hill near the Puerto Suello Club), Fred's Garage, Bill and Myrtle's Restaurant (where Le Cualet Basque is now), Wrays Pet Supplies, Wrays Beauty Salon, Tweedies General Store (where 7-11 is now), Fenton's Nursery and Supplies, Machado Roofing and George's Gallinas Beach. Tweedie's was quite a popular stopping place - if one hadn't already been to China Camp - for Sunday drivers. In 1952 dial telephones were installed throughout Marin. No longer would callers hear the operator and her pleasant "numero, please" on picking up the receiver!

1950 and time for change again! The J.D. O'Conner Company purchased the Marin County Airport in order to build 700 homes and a shopping center on the surrounding area. Another air strip developed a little further north at the Smith Brothers Ranch. And then Gross Field in Novato was named the official County Airport. The area around the old airport was marshland and the

builders would use 90,000 yards of fill to push the water back. Where did they get the dirt? Look at the cliff just across the road! The local duck hunters would have to go further down the road toward Buck's Landing now. More homes were built and more families moved to Santa Venetia. Two more schools were built - Gallinas and John MacPhail. In 1966, shortly before he died, Meriam Stetson sold the family home to the Young Men's Christian Association for their San Rafael home and office. Some of the local stores went out of business as more and more families found easier shopping at San Rafael and the new Northgate Shopping Center. Santa Venetia's new claim to fame is the world-famous Marin County Civic Center located on one of our beautiful hills - although officially in San Rafael city limits!

Industrial & Harbor
SAN RAFAEL

Here is the Harbor and Industrial area of San Rafael—rapidly developing as a manufacturing and distributing center for the Redwood Empire. Payroll expansion, through new industrial manufacturing plants and wholesale distributors here contribute much to economic growth of all the area.

The increased use of San Rafael Harbor as a service and sales headquarters for private yachts adds to this general development.

As the southern terminus of the Northwestern Pacific Railroad, San Rafael is the natural distributing center for the gateway to the Redwood Empire.

1950

