

# The Moraga Historical Society

2023 FIRST QUARTER

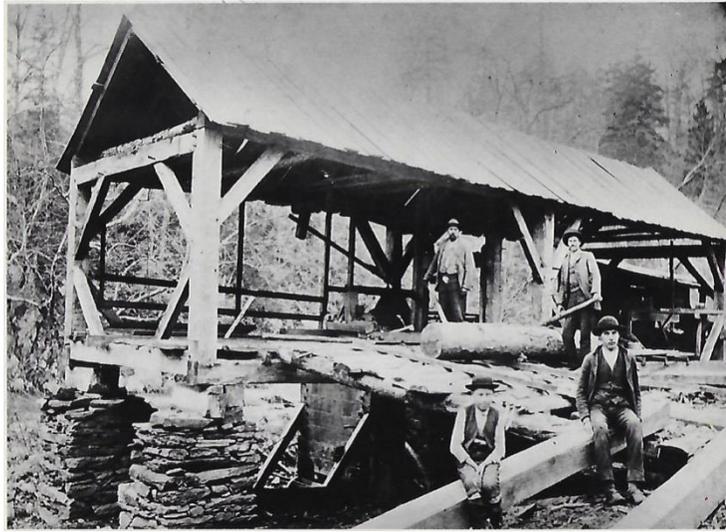
MORAGA MEMORIES: yesterday, today, tomorrow

## The Forgotten Redwoods of Moraga

Adapted from "Moraga Before 1900: A Community's History" by Donald D. Walker

Two miles west of the Moraga Shopping Center is the Reinhardt Redwood Regional Park, where once stood a forest of as many as 2000 enormous, ancient, Coast redwood trees (*Sequoia Sempervirens*). The second-growth trees found there today are the only reminders of what was once the site of a thriving lumber industry! The original forest covered an irregularly shaped tract about three and a half miles long by two miles wide, extending across the top of the Oakland hills from Diamond Canyon on the western slope to San Leandro Reservoir on the eastern side. Known as the

San Antonio redwoods, trees in this grove were as large as any on the Pacific Coast, some measuring as much as thirty-two feet in diameter and three hundred feet tall. The towering trees were grouped in three separate groves: the San Antonio Redwoods along the top and western slopes of the hills; the Middle Redwood in the canyon formed by Redwood Creek; and the Moraga Redwoods, further north in the canyon of the upper San Leandro Creek. As quoted from Sherwood Burgess's "The Forgotten Redwood of the East Bay" California Historical Society Quarterly (March 1951), "They were known as the "Blossoms Rock Trees because they were used to lay a sailing course that would avoid an underwater rock hazard between Alcatraz and Yerba Buena Island." A narrow strip on the east side between San Leandro Creek and the ridge to the southwest was part of the Rancho Laguna de Los Palos Colorados (Palos Colorados named by Padre Juan Crespi in 1772). Timbers from this forest were apparently used in building Mission San Jose since the grant to Moraga and Bernal stipulated that the mission was to have continued use of the redwoods.



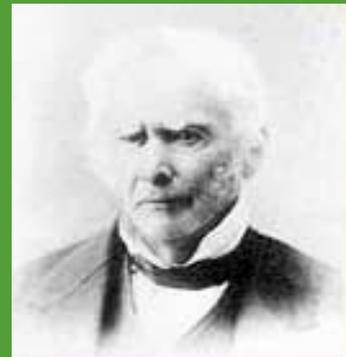
They were known as the "Blossoms Rock Trees because they were used to lay a sailing course that would avoid an underwater rock hazard between Alcatraz and Yerba Buena Island." A narrow strip on the east side between San Leandro Creek and the ridge to the southwest was part of the Rancho Laguna de Los Palos Colorados (Palos Colorados named by Padre Juan Crespi in 1772). Timbers from this forest were apparently used in building Mission San Jose since the grant to Moraga and Bernal stipulated that the mission was to have continued use of the redwoods.

Logging began in a small way about 1840 when a couple of British sailors jumped ship and cut timber to sell to John Sutter in the Sacramento Valley. About the same time two French carpenters, also deserters, cut planks and sent them to the tiny town of Yerba Buena (San Francisco). Activity increased when American immigrants began to arrive in 1848, among them Elam Brown, founder of Lafayette. Brown, Jacob Harlan and Richard Swift spent a month splitting fifteen thousand shingles from a single tree to sell in San Francisco for five dollars per thousand. Before 1848 lumbering was the only industry in the East Bay. Then, with the growth of San Francisco during the Gold Rush, there was an

overwhelming demand for lumber. Prices skyrocketed from \$30 per 100 board feet to \$350 and finally \$600 per thousand. Many of our present-day road patterns were formed by early logging operations.

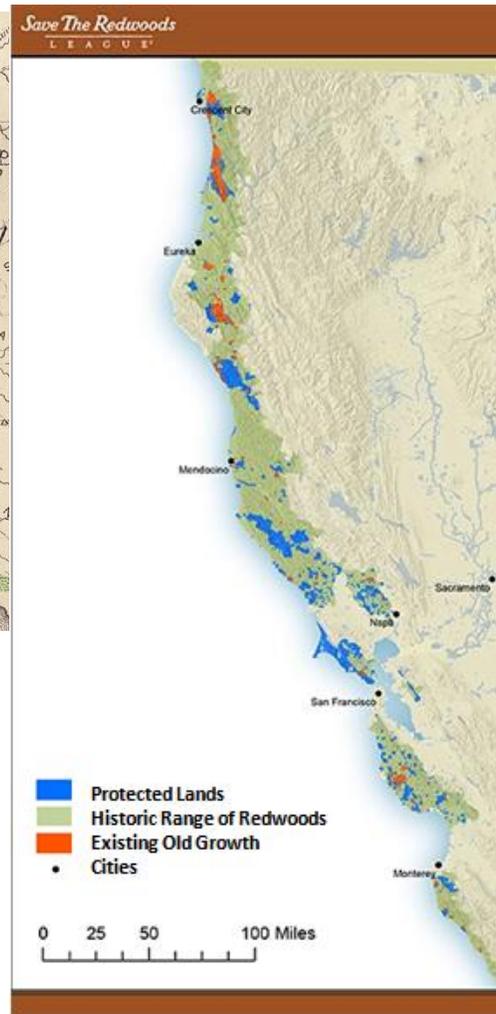
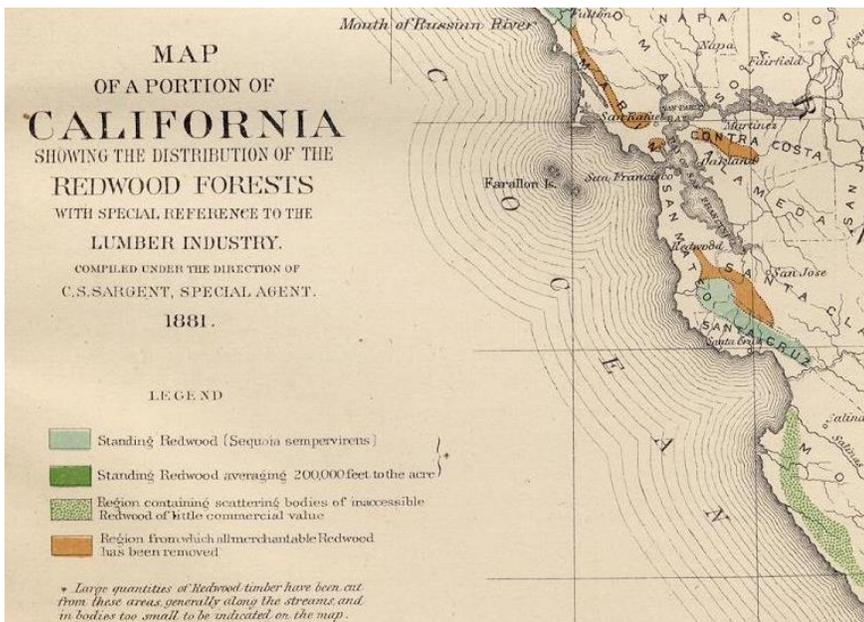
By 1850, as the lure to the gold fields diminished, activity resumed in the redwoods. That year, William Taylor and James Owen built the first steam powered mill in the Moraga woods, ignoring the fact that they were on private property, probably on present day Pinehurst Road near the Canyon School. Most of the lumber was hauled to the town of Martinez, via Lafayette, for shipment but by 1852 much of it was going to the farmers and ranchers who were settling in the eastern valleys. Lafayette at this time became an important commercial center.

The most important mill in the area was that of William and Thomas Prince, from Ohio, located in the heart of the valley that is now Redwood Regional Park. The 1852 Census of Contra Costa County showed William Prince, aged 32, as a sawmill owner, with 30 lumbermen, laborers, and teamsters as well as a cook and engineer. The redwood lumberjacks, as many as 300-400, were rough, violent, and lawless. They gambled, drank, caroused, brawled, stabbed, and stole. In Oakland they were known as "that notorious mob element from the redwoods". There are rumors of murder, lynching and cattle rustling. When things got too far out of hand the more law-abiding citizens formed vigilante committees and rendered "severe punishment including hanging". During the heyday of lumbering on the Moraga grant, several hundred lumberjacks lived in the canyon. Of the three precincts in the county set up to ratify the state constitution in 1849, Moraga Redwoods outstripped the other polling places with 61 votes! Hiram Thorn and William Hamilton built a \$20,000 mill in late 1852 on 330 acres of land claimed by Joaquin Moraga as part of his land grant. In February 1853 Elam Brown of Lafayette purchased the tract from Moraga and ordered the mill owners off his property. Thorn and Hamilton contended that Moraga's claim had yet to be recognized by the U.S. courts and was therefore public land. They finally came to terms with Brown and agreed to give him \$60 in lumber each month and purchase the land if the Moraga claim was approved. When the redwoods were gone, the mill operators moved on and Brown kept the land and lumber. By 1860, the Moraga redwoods were decimated, and the once great trees were reduced to "decaying" stumps. Not a single tree was saved, not even the two giants which guided the sailing vessels across the harbor waters!



Elam Brown was born in 1797 in Herkimer County, in Northern New York. He was the son of Thomas and Elizabeth (Lyons) Brown, who married in 1791 in Worcester County, Massachusetts, and who started Elam on a life of migration by taking him to Massachusetts and then to Ohio in his childhood. Elam Brown moved quickly around the country, marrying his first wife, Sally Allen, on 9 January 1823 in Greene County, Illinois. He was the captain of an overland company that traveled to California in 1848. His wife having died several years earlier, he brought his children to Santa Clara County, where he became involved in politics. He acquired land, including the Acalanes Rancho in Lafayette, and married a second time to Margaret, the widow of Isaac Allen. Known as the founder of Lafayette, Elam Brown died at the age of 92 years on 13 August 1889 in Lafayette and is buried in Alhambra Cemetery in Martinez.

## Was the Bay Area once blanketed with redwoods?



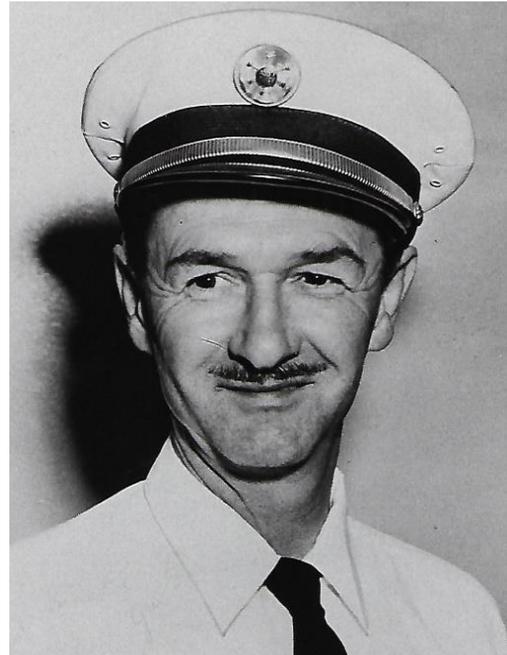
As somebody who has lived in Moraga for three decades I am used to seeing redwood trees everywhere. I assumed this was their natural habitat and with the help of tolerant residents redwoods were reclaiming the land after intensive logging during the 1800s wiped out the old growth forest ringing San Francisco Bay. Unfettered regrowth when allowed is what I see when I drive along Pinehurst Road through Canyon or hike in Reinhardt Redwood Regional Park. While researching the Old Moraga Town Site Walking Tour I was struck by the barrenness of present-day Moraga's hills in old photos as late as 1960. Why did the trees rebound in Canyon but not Moraga where residential development did not start until the 1950's? Decaying stumps generate new growth and the huge diameter of these stumps made it impractical to remove them. Further research drawing on organizations such as [Save the Redwoods League](#) revealed that redwoods thrive in only a few parts of the Bay Area, and the area straddling the Oakland Hills was the biggest and only part if you ignore Marin and the Santa Cruz Mountains. The [1881 compilation map by Special Agent C.S. Sargent](#), which records what was logged and still standing, reveals the limited extent of old growth redwoods before lumbering decimated them. The [SRL map](#) shows the historic range of redwoods, protected second growth forest, and where 5% remains as old growth. In the Bay Area old growth is found only at John Muir Woods and Big Basin. Most of the Bay Area, including Moraga, never had redwood trees because these trees are water-thirsty and during the dry summer depend on sweeping water from the sky when fog rolls in at night. Redwoods thrive in Moraga only because the residents plant and irrigate them. The irony is that one day if climate change has driven away the fog, causing the second growth redwoods to fail in the Reinhardt Redwood Regional Park and adjacent Canyon, Moraga may be a place people visit to admire redwood trees. (John Kaiser)

## Have you ever wondered why this street is named BAITX?

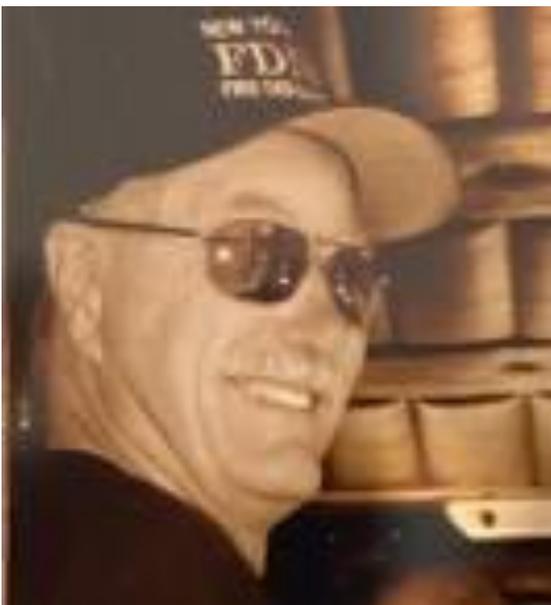


responded. **Al Baitx** was the first paid Chief and was amazed when offered the job by Gerald Gill, head of the East Contra Costa Fire Protection District. It all began when he attended a meeting of the Moraga Community Club in 1950 to determine what could be done about future fire protection. A native of Oakland, Baitx and his wife Jo moved to Moraga in 1948 to the Orchard Dell sector, later to become Baitx Drive. Although he asserted that he knew nothing, residents began to look to Baitx for help with mountain lions in their backyards, flat tires, cars in ditches, heart attacks, and taxi service for drunks! He also put out fires. In his 18 years of service Moraga grew to 12,500 and the department grew from three jeeps

In 1950 there were only 35 homes in Moraga with a total population of about 200! The fire department was volunteer and when the siren went off, the entire community



and a 250-gallon reject Army pumper to seven pieces of equipment, a 1,200 gallon-per-minute pumper and 13 trained fire fighters.



**John Baitx**, the son of Al and Jo Baitx and the youngest of three Baitx children and grew up riding through the hills and pear orchards of Moraga in a community where you helped your neighbors, volunteered at the fire department, and worked cattle with local ranchers. A graduate of Miramonte in 1965, John and his wife Gail raised four children on the same property where he grew up. John followed in his father's footsteps and began his 31-year career as an engineer, driving the fire engine with the Dublin Fire Department in 1968. Like his father John enjoyed the community, getting involved in sporting and school activities, serving

as board member of the Moraga Ranch Swim Club and heading the Leo Club, a division of the Moraga Lions Club for high school students.

## Annual Membership dues

Membership dues for the Moraga Historical Society are collected every January. The purpose of MHS is to preserve our local history, and your support helps maintain this infrastructure, digitalize the archives, give educational value for historical research, maintain our 3<sup>rd</sup> grade program, and help local high schoolers research important issues in our community. Enclosed in this newsletter is the dues envelope. Take time now to fill it out, add your check and mail your support to preserving local history.

Student membership: \$10

Individual membership: \$15

Family membership: \$25

### **VOLUNTEERS ARE NEEDED FOR:**

Treasurer

Archivist

Digitalization

Board member

Speaker

Newsletter

## 1841 Moraga Adobe Update

In 2022 great strides were made in the Adobe's architectural rehabilitation. A new roof, reinforced porch, glass windows and original trim were replicated and installed. Interior electrical work was mostly complete. A separate bathroom/storage building was built, and final grading of the site is expected soon. After meeting the fundraising goal for the acquisition of the property, rehabilitation continues. Some work on the building was slower than anticipated but adjustments were made to enhance historical accuracy. FJMA requested a significant change to reconfigure the exterior attic access and porch below based on recently discovered photographs in the Moraga Historical Society and the Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley.

## President's Message

Make sure you check out our website at [www.moragahistory.org](http://www.moragahistory.org) or Tweet us @MoragaHistory or email at [info@moragahistory.org](mailto:info@moragahistory.org). Our phone number works also at 925-377-8734. There is staff at the History Center on Thursdays from 1-3 pm, and you can always make an appointment to visit or talk to an archivist.

### Board of Directors 2023

---

John Kaiser

Vera Kochan

Bonnie Krames

Ron Louis

Carole Lucas

Colleen Lund

John Minney

Susan Skilton

Susan Sperry

Moraga Historical Society  
P.O. Box 103  
Moraga, CA 94556