



## **Rancho Laguna De Los Palos Colorados Historical Notes by the Moraga Historical Society**

### **Town of Moraga**



The Town of Moraga is named for José Joaquin de la Santissima Trinidad Moraga. He was the grandson of Lt. José Joaquin Moraga, who was second in command of the 1775 Anza Expedition, the founder of San Francisco's Mission Dolores and the founder and first commandant of the Presidio. Joaquin, like his father, Gabriel Moraga and grandfather, José Joaquin Moraga, served in the Mexican Army. In 1835 the Mexican government did not have money to pay the soldiers so they gave Joaquin and his cousin Juan Bernal a land grant. The original land grant was known as Rancho Laguna De Los Palos Colorados (Ranch of the Lake by the red trees). The land grant was 13,316 acres. Today it would stretch from the Orinda BART station to the Lafayette BART station, over the hills to the Moraga Valley and Canyon. There were two shallow tule lakes on the Rancho, one where Campolindo High School is located today and the other at St. Mary's College.

### **Fossils**

The Rancho area is known for its fossils. The rocks exposed to view in the Moraga area are approximately 15 million years old. Plant and animal fossils, seashells, bones, teeth, and footprints of extinct animals such as mastodons, three toed horses and camels have been found on the Moraga Rancho. The fossils were found in the area of the lake bed currently Campolindo High School, and the cliffs along Bollinger Canyon Road.

## **Saklan**

The Saklans, a tribelet of the Bay Miwok group, were the original settlers in the Moraga Valley. The Saklans were not warlike; they were hunters and gatherers, not farmers. They fished in the rivers and lakes of the Moraga Valley. They harvested acorns, berries, and grasses. They hunted deer, rabbits, squirrels and birds. Their territory extended from San Pablo Creek to Lafayette and through the San Ramon Valley to Dublin. The discovery of two burial sites at St. Mary's College and numerous findings of relics throughout the Moraga area clearly show that Native Americans also made this valley their home. Within the valley there were seldom more than 50 such inhabitants at any one time. Due to the Spaniards, and later the Americans, by 1900, the natives in the area were wiped out.

## **Redwoods and Lumbering**



Redwoods from the Moraga Canyon grove and others provided the lumbering industry for disappointed gold seekers, adventurers and Yankee farmers. Because the demand for wood in the infant state of California was so overwhelming, lumbering became far more profitable than any form of gold mining. A steam-powered sawmill built in 1852 provided work in Moraga until the 1950s when the redwoods were depleted. During this brief heyday of lumbering, several hundred lumberjacks lived in Moraga. The redwood trees we see today are second growth trees. Early seafaring captains used the sight of the redwoods in Canyon as a landmark to turn into San Francisco Bay.

## **The Moraga Adobe**

An adobe house was built by Jose Joaquin Moraga in about 1841, containing three rooms with a fireplace. The kitchen was outside; ceiling beams and flooring were made from local redwoods. It was built from bricks made of adobe mud with straw and leather pieces in the bricks. This was the home of the Moraga family until around 1886. Built on open ground, devoid of trees and elevated, the house was placed near a spring for water with a view of the valley. For many years after the rancho period, no one lived in the house and it fell apart. In 1941 Mrs. James Irvine bought the Adobe and restored it. In 1954 it was designated a California Historical Landmark (#509). In recent years no one has lived in the Adobe. Today efforts are underway to restore the Adobe and create a historic park around it.

## **The Moraga Ranch**

On the Rancho, the Moraga family raised cattle for the hides. In the 1880's the Moraga Rancho became a dairy farm. In 1912 James Irvine bought the Moraga Rancho, and planted pear and walnut trees, sugar beets, corn, and tomatoes. The Ranch had a cook house, a mess hall, bunk houses, a blacksmith, barns and corrals. Across the creek was housing for migrant workers. On Moraga Way, adjacent to the creek, the remains of the walnut hulling shed can still be seen next to the Orinda/Moraga Fire House. Today, some of these red buildings are still standing on School Street across from Safeway.

## **Railroads**



The Oakland and Antioch Railroad, which began operation in 1909, once again sparked growth and from 1911, 1912 Concord, Bay Point, Lafayette and Walnut Creek were all connected and the line was renamed the Oakland, Antioch and Eastern. In 1913 it merged with the Sacramento Short Line. It wasn't until 1917 that the Shepherd Canyon tunnel was completed and the two counties, Contra Costa and Alameda, were linked. The line now totaled 271 miles of track. Later the line became known as the Sacramento Northern RR, which ran all the way to Chico. In the Moraga Valley the train stopped at Sequoia, Canyon, Pinehurst, Valle Vista, Moraga, Saint Mary's College, Burton, West Lafayette, Reliez and Saranap. Passenger trains ran until 1941. Freight service peaked during WWII and continued until 1957. Today, many miles of the train tracks through the Moraga Valley are a paved hiking and biking trail.

## **The Moraga Barn**

The Moraga Barn is one of the oldest buildings in Moraga. The Barn was originally built as a hotel and stage stop by Robert Noble Burgess, a partner in the Moraga Land and Water Company. Its five rooms were planned as accommodations for the passengers on the Sacramento Northern Railroad. In 1916 it was converted to a bar and general store. In 1927 Moraga was chosen for the first dial telephone service in the state and the switchboard was in the Barn. In 1935, it was against the law to have a building with a sign for a bar, so the owners painted an 'N' on the sign to become the BARN. Today, the Barn is being restored as a commercial building.

## Saint Mary's College



A Christian Brothers college, Saint Mary's, moved to the valley in 1928 when given 100 acres by the Irvine and Breed Moraga Company. It had been founded in 1863 in San Francisco but moved to Oakland in 1889. In the late 30's and early 40's the school earned a national reputation because of its "Galloping Gaels", a football power. Also, during the Second World War, Saint Mary's was one of four sites chosen in the nation to host a Navy Pre-Flight School. The college became coeducational in 1970. Today, Saint Mary's is a highly rated liberal arts college.

## Hacienda de las Flores



Before Joaquin Moraga's title to the Rancho was recorded, Jesse Hall Williams squatted on land where the Hacienda is located. He later bought 160 acres of the Rancho. His son sold this land in 1906. Alberta Hortense and her friend, Gertrude E. Mallette, inherited 20 acres and planned to provide a home for orphaned boys. They had the original one storey house built for the orphanage. The boys' orphanage did not survive when state inspectors determined there was no male on the premises. In the crash of 1929, the women were forced to sell. Alice and Donald Rheem purchased the property and 1,650 acres of Rancho property which Mr. Rheem began to develop in 1937.

At the Hacienda, the Rheems did extensive remodeling. A second floor was added on the two wings of the house and a north wing to the rear, a stable, horse racetrack, five-car garage, and servant's quarters. A classical pool complex and guest bedrooms were also added naming the estate the "San Simeon of the East Bay". The estate was sold to the Moraga Parks and Recreation Authority in 1973. Today the Hacienda serves as an East Bay premier wedding/event venue and Moraga's community center maintained by the Hacienda Foundation.

## Early Subdivisions

In 1870 Moraga Valley farmers needed a railroad to transport their crops to market. Railroad builders Angus A. Grant and James Williamson formed the Moraga Land Association and the Moraga Railroad Company and planned to encourage settlement by a rail link from Moraga to Oakland. By 1892 rails had been laid as far as Bryant's Corner, known today as Orinda Crossroads. Subsequent developers formed the Hooper Land Company and the Moraga Land Company. A subdivision was planned for central Moraga in 1913. It also failed and all that remains today are four huge stone urns on Country Club Drive, then known as Munster Drive. The family name was really Munsterer.

## **World War II**

Isolated at the end of pastoral Camino Pablo Drive is a special atmospherically and geographically correct location for receiving radio waves from the Pacific. Reginald Tibbetts, former UPI employee, and owner of this property was an amateur radio operator. With the declaration of war, the military entered with highly sophisticated equipment enhancing Mr. Tibbett's radio capabilities. This created a powerful intelligence gathering center of communications. It played a significant role in intercepting and breaking the Japanese code and turned the tide of war at the Battle of Midway. Conveniently, Mr. Tibbetts was also Moraga's postmaster operating from the Sacramento Northern Railway's freight station across the street from the Moraga Barn.

## **Moraga and the U.N.**

The nations of the world gathered in San Francisco in April, 1945, in search of a location for the headquarters of the United Nations Organization. San Francisco Mayor, Roger Lapham, advocated Moraga as a desirable location with its mild weather and beautiful pastoral scenery. Eventually, the United Nations chose the big city of New York instead of pastoral Moraga.

## **Moraga After WWII**

Moraga remained primarily a ranching and farming community until 1953. The Rheem California Land Company and the Utah Construction and Mining Company have played major roles in the development of housing and commercial facilities. As early as 1950, Moragans sought to keep the town's semi-agricultural, low density identity. In November of 1974 an incorporation election was successful, and the "Town of Moraga" was born. Today, Moraga is still a primarily residential community, featuring spacious home sites, modern schools, a Town library and convenient shopping centers. The current population is estimated to be approximately 17,000.

## **Moraga Library**

The first library in Moraga opened in 1918 with 100 books. Since then our local library has moved from what was then the Sacramento Northern Railroad station, to a corner of the Barn, to the Pacific Telephone Central office at the corner of School Street and Country Club Drive, to the present day building on St. Mary's Road. In between the above locations, the community was served by a Bookmobile. The local library is part of the Contra Costa County Library System with staff and books provided by the County. The building is owned by the Town of Moraga and was dedicated and opened on September 22, 1974.

## The Willow Spring School



Built in 1918, Willow Spring School, just 2.5 blocks south of Moraga Way, was the second school built in Moraga replacing the small wood building that was in the field behind Moraga Shopping Center. It was a very modern school with kitchen, cafeteria, cloak room, and a horse rail outside the door. This school served the valley until 1958, when the Donald Rheem Elementary School was built. Today it is the Willow Spring Church on School Street.

## The History Center

The Moraga Historical Society was formed in October 1965 for the purpose of collecting, preserving and disseminating information concerning the Rancho Moraga and the Town of Moraga. The Moraga History Center, located in the Moraga Library building opened July 4, 1999 contains files, photographs, artifacts, books, documents, oral tapes, dioramas, slides and films. It is open three afternoons each week, staffed by volunteers, for researchers, and those who are interested in the history of our area. Third grade students from the Moraga School District visit the History Center every spring to complete the learning on Moraga's history.



**Moraga Center location:**  
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With information from *Moraga's Pride*