MDWSUN-12-68

Valle Vista: A Subdivision For Commuters

By JUANITA MALONEY
Sun Staff Writer

Commuting from the Orinda - Moraga - Lafayette area is nothing new; nor are subdivisions.

A typical subdivision of today could well be named Valle Vista — the name given Moraga Company's Subdivision No. 3 in 1914.

Valle Vista is no more. Businessmen who commute through Redwood Canyon from Lafayette or Moraga and as far into the county as Pleasant Hill, drive by what was one of the most thriving communities of the second decade of this century.

A brief resume, before looking into a more detailed past, concludes that people started moving into Valle Vista in 1914 and almost all of the property was secured by EBMUD by 1954.

Valle Vista is located almost one full mile into Canyon from Moraga. It is a valley lying to the south of Canyon Road, and to the east of the narrow, winding white bridge. The best view of the area is from the bridge looking eastward over the valley.

It's sylvan setting is free from the sliced hills of today's building methods. San Leandro reservoir is a refuge for flocks of geese, quail, etc.

Brother L. Dennis, Christian Brother at St. Mary's College, has an unending source of information about area history and has uncovered many of the facts presented here.

As historian of the Moraga Historical Society and assistant librarian at St. Mary's College, Brother Dennis also has a wealth of information.

The subdivided land was all part of the original Spanish land grant. It was acquired by H.M.W. Carpentier between 1860 and 1886. He sold the land to C.A. Cooper & Co., in 1913 who in turn sold the land to the Moraga Land Company in the same year.

Robert Noble Burgess, a realtor and member of the Moraga Company Board of Directors immediately mapped the area for subdividing. In 1914, when the buyers began building their homes, the Oakland-Antioch railroad began its first runs through the area.

Thus came the first commuters.

This railway, the bed of which is easily seen from the present Canyon Road, ran from Oakland and had stations at Pinehurst, Valle Vista, Moraga and Burton. The Valle Vista station was located near to the narrow bridge mentioned above. The bridge is a railway overpass.

W.E. Hespe of Richmond is a former Valle Vista resident contacted in search for information. His parents, Mr. and Mrs. Herman E. Hespe, first purchased a small lot in Valle Vista in 1915, then bought five acres (Lot 17) on the bottom area and built their home. The Richmond resident was a very small child during the years the family lived there, but recall that his father moved the family there from Berkeley because of his father's poor health.

(Both Mr. and Mrs. Herman Hespe are still alive and reside in Santa Cruz).

Hespe's mother was one of the first commuters — she worked at PG&E in San Francisco and rode the Oakland-Antioch daily from the Valle Vista station. He also recalls that Mr. Holt, another Valle Vista resident, was a San Francisco commuter.

The Hespe family moved to Los Angeles before the subdivision land was under purchase by EBMUD, but Hespe recalls that they had been unsuccessful in selling the home for a few years.

Most prolific in information bearers about Villa Vista is Leland Dethlefson who resided in Canyon during the 20's and moved to Valle Vista in 1936.

The following facts are as authenticated as can be thus far:

Most what can be determined from a 1913 EBMUD map, there were 98 lots in Valle Vista. Many owners, however, bought several lots: i.e. Dr. B.E. Merrill who is shown as owner of lots 1,2,3,4 and 69.

The Hespe lot was one of the largest single purchases. Dethlefson owned lots 29, 30 and 31. Though nature has taken over what remains of the foundations of the home there is still evidence of a formal garden on those grounds.

Here and there among the weeds are circular plantings of iris and agapantha. A cement gold fish pond is nearly filled with soil, but the plantings around are not to be smothered out — periwinkle peeks through wild grass and quince trees continue to bear fruit.

Gardening was as important to the 1915 home owner as it is to present-day Californias, if the planting pattern that can still be seen is any criterion.

Another lot features a rather ornate cement front stoop with a domestic bush still growing alongside.

The front property line of the houses on one of the streets is defined with a cement wall topped by the graceful old hooped wire fencing. Evidently the fences surrounded each of the lots . . .and may have been a neighborhood project.

Water supply for Valle Vista was piped down from the spring at the Adobe (that marvelously preserved Moraga home overlooking Moraga Way in Orinda). W.E. Hespe remembers going with his father as a small boy to the Adobe on some business connected with water restriction.

Another person, familiar with Valle Vista, remarked that not only was water restricted, but you never knew when your particular supply would be cut off.

Hespe also recalls that there were only two other children attending elementary school when he lived there. He still has his first grade certificate from Moraga School, signed by a Miss Fontes.

(Moraga School — which still stands is is now used as a church — was at that time called Willow Springs School. What was then called Moraga School was further toward Orinda. What is now Canyon School was called Valle Vista School).

The Oakland-Antioch railway was also interesting in its many name changes — reminding one of the game of Monopoly. From Oakland-Antioch it changed to the San Francisco-Sacramento, then the Sacramento Northern and finally, the "Sacramento Shortline."

From what can be determined, most of the homes were built privately, with the owners contracting with local carpenters.

East Bay's original train commuters looked into Valle Vista area in the 1920's, from this vantage point looking west. The above picture was taken from the Oakland-Antioch railway bed, the remains of which are still seen above the present Canyon Road. nl central County, the train picked up Oakland, Berkeley and San Francisco commuters at stations in Burton, Moraga, Valla Vista and Pinehurst. Automobile commuters today still have the quiet view, but can wisk into S.F. over the bridge instead of the ferryboats.

THIS CEMENT and stone foundation gives an idea o
what is left of Valle Vista—Moraga's thriving sub
division in the early half of the century.