

City Close, Country Quiet

The San Ramon Valley 1945-85



When the boys came marching home from War, California and the San Ramon Valley were never the same. The San Ramon Valley was transformed from a rural community to a suburban one as new people moved in, new houses, roads, water and sewer systems were built. Interstate 680 opened and the vast groves of Bishop Ranch became a Business Park.

Jack Estenson commented on Valley life in the fifties:

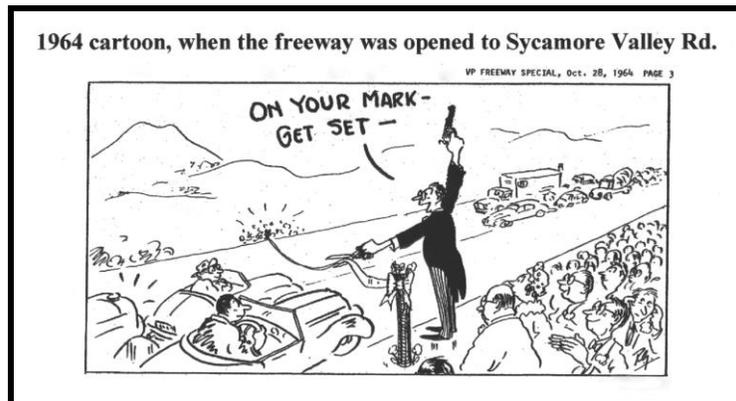
There used to be a little bakery with nine seats and, when it was full, we used to say all the businessmen of Danville were in there....There were two churches and one high school. If you went to church or attended a PTA meeting, you saw everybody in town.

The entire Valley had 2,126 residents in 1940 and, by 1990, the population was 85,085.

A River of Cars Runs Through It

Rural roads stretched like nets across the Valley in the forties all leading to the small communities on the Danville Highway. As the East Bay grew, drivers dreaded the bumper-to-bumper two-lane traffic through San Ramon, Danville and Alamo.

Plans for the I-680 freeway and its alignment were discussed at length. Congressman John F. Baldwin, who had grown up in Danville and was on the Public Works Committee, helped decide where the route should go.



"Frontier 680" celebrated the Walnut Creek to Danville section in 1964 with a parade featuring pioneer son Claude Glass as Honorary Grand Marshal. In 1966 the rest of the freeway was completed from Danville to Dublin with a "DD Days" party.

Peace and quiet on the main highway was the result. John May walked out to get the newspaper one morning in November and saw no cars at all. Their house was next to Danville Blvd. When he came back he said "Margaret, it is as if a bomb dropped somewhere and we are the only people on earth."

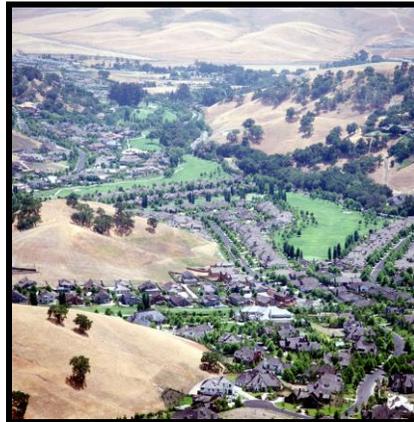
Houses, Houses Everywhere

Even though there weren't many valley jobs to be had after the War, people with an eye to the future thought that the valley would be a prime place for homes. And they were right. Homes were built at an ever-accelerating pace, encroaching on the walnut and pear trees orchards and ranch lands. Increased taxes and the ready market for homes facilitated change as the Baldwin, Meese, Wiedemann and

Stone ranches, first founded in the nineteenth century, were developed.

Montair Homes in Danville began in 1946 when George Jovick bought 350 acres of the former Macomber Ranch. In Alamo, Round Hill Country Club was the brain child of Harlan Geldermann, a local real estate developer for a historic family; he bought two Alamo ranches from the Mott sisters and Grover Squier and opened the golf course and clubhouse in 1961.

In the late fifties Volk-McLain Communities, Inc. began building homes in South San Ramon and Dublin, called San Ramon Village. With a catchy radio jingle, "*City close, country quiet...*" Ken Volk and Bob McLain planned entire shopping centers, fire stations and schools, all to serve 10,750 homes in Dublin and San Ramon.



Blackhawk Homes in Diablo's Foothills

One controversial housing development proposed 4,800 homes on the Blackhawk Ranch in 1974. A law suit was filed by environmentalists, petitions were gathered and "truth squads" from Blackhawk stirred the mix. Finally the number of homes was reduced to 2,400, with 2,000 acres of open space dedicated to Mount Diablo State Park. The first luxury houses opened in 1979.

Who's In Charge?

A growing suburban population needed different types of water, sewer and other governmental services. County planner Tony Dehaesus said there was never a shortage of Valley citizens commenting on the various plans. Controversy over the location and size of water and sewer pipes was a constant, since it was clear that these services enabled the growth to proceed.

When the first large sewer line was built in 1955, objections came from everywhere. But a "resolution of necessity" based on health reasons was passed by the Board of Supervisors -- and in went the 30 inch pipe.

Water from East Bay Municipal Utility District expanded beginning in 1962. When EBMUD annexed Diablo Country Club in the sixties, Blackhawk Ranch owner Howard Peterson said he convinced the company to extend a pipe to the Ranch, since he "just had a big yard."

Cities for the Valley

South County elections on cityhood occurred four times as the Valley grew. Community leaders wanted more police and parks and local control over new developments. The opposition focused on an expectation of higher taxes, loss of community identity and satisfaction with the County government.

Cityhood for Alamo and Danville first came to the ballot in 1964, losing by a vote of 2,000 to 1,958. One effective campaign sign proclaimed, "ALAMO, DO YOU WANT TO BE SWALLOWED BY DANVILLE?" Other elections on a Valley-wide city went to the ballot in 1967, 1973 and 1976. All lost.



Finally, Danville won at the polls on June 8, 1982, by 5,809 to 4,952 votes. Then San Ramon voters overwhelmingly approved incorporation (3,825-1,254) on March 8, 1983.



The Great School Debates

The small Valley schools had their hands full as school student population exploded from 4,200 in 1960 to 14,500 in 1985. In 1965, voter approved the new SRV Unified School District, replaced four existing small ones. The new School Board chose Dr. Richard Foster, an educator with a golden tongue. While he was in office the schools were in an uproar. Foster and the Board wanted to turn a new leaf in teaching and facilities. Open classrooms were established, controversial speakers appeared and dramatically different teaching techniques were encouraged.

Arguments over progressive vs. traditional education split the community. The Board meetings were wild. One 1968 meeting saw 1,600 people jammed into the SRV High School gym to debate Foster's job performance and comment on a "Human Rights Convocation" at Monte Vista which included Black Panthers as speakers.

Parks Bloom in the Valley

Efforts to provide recreation activities for youth began at the Danville Recreation Center from 1951-55, funded by donations. Programs and local parks in South San Ramon began after 1960, with local parks in the rest of the Valley begun by an R-7 County Service Area after 1974.

The County was unwilling to fund either parks or recreation services but, in 1964, County voters annexed to the East Bay Regional Parks District. Danville's Manfred Lindner had a passion for Las Trampas hills and organized a Las Trampas Wilderness Committee to promote it as a regional park.

Committee member Patrick Whittle wrote: *Let's have a few places of which we can say 'Well, at least we left this spot alone, just the way nature made it.'*

The Park District began purchasing Las Trampas land in 1966 including the 1000-acre Corduroy Hills property west of playwright Eugene O'Neill's house. Local citizens saved O'Neill's Tao House and property which is now a National Historic Site



The new cities of Danville and San Ramon planned and developed the parks which early park advocates had only dreamed about. Beginning in 1986 the multi-use Iron Horse Regional Trail on the old railroad right-of-way was built through the Valley, providing a linear community park.

Business and Business Parks

People loved shopping in Concord's brand new Sun Valley Mall beginning in 1967. New businesses moved into the Valley as well. A plethora of gas stations lined the main road and won Danville the nickname "Gasoline Alley." An effort to upgrade the older downtown used the slogan *Old Century Leisure -- New Century Convenience*. Businesses were urged to spiff up their fronts with western themes. Dr. Tom Ohlson, veterinarian and Chamber President, added handsome lettering to his sign and put flowers out front in pots.



Tony Cicero, John May and Bill Hockins set up a new sign

The 1770-acre Bishop Ranch was eyed by locals as land which might provide what was called the "jobs-housing balance." Western Electric bought the property in 1970, proposing an entire "new

town" project with controlled industry and homes, then sold parts of the property to others.

In 1978 585 acres of the Ranch was bought by the Sunset Development Company. Although the father-son team of Masud and Alex Mehran initially planned homes, the San Ramon Homeowners Association and others urged them to provide job opportunities.



Bollinger Canyon Interchange Ribbon-cutting at BRBP, 1985

Sunset's Bishop Ranch Business Park evolved into the largest business park west of Chicago, with headquarters for Pacific Bell and Chevron and other office space totaling 8.5 million square feet. The number of employees rose from 1,500 in 1984 to 15,000 in 1988. Many shifted from jobs in San Francisco, joking they were moving to "San Remote."

The Park's brochure stated the Valley's amenities "reflect the San Ramon Valley's maturation into a flourishing suburban network of homes, businesses and industries."

Independence Days

Virginia Deaton began a "patriotic Fourth of July for the children" in 1961, which was such a success that the event continues today. By 1968 the Danville Rotary pancake breakfast, Kiwanis parade and community fireworks drew 4,000 people to the Valley's Old Fashioned Celebration. In the 1990s nearly 30,000 people came to the parade and the fireworks moved to San Ramon in an undeveloped part of the Bishop Ranch Business Park.



Kids watching the parade, from the SRV Times

One of the classic "edge cities" of the nineties, the San Ramon Valley has become a microcosm of California's post World War II development. The freeway impacts, housing developments, business parks, cities, trails and parks all reflect what is happening throughout the state. A lovely place to live and work in the shadow of Mount Diablo, the valley today has moved beyond a bedroom community with ranching on its hills. The challenges of the California belong to the valley as well.

Sources

Brochures from Montair Homes, Round Hill Country Club, Blackhawk Homes, Volk-McClain Communities, Inc.

***Contra Costa Times*, April 17, 1975; *Hay Days brochure*, 1970; *Valley Pioneer*, Jan. 26, 1986.**

Personal communications: Mary Baldwin, Virginia Deaton, Tony Dehaesus, Mildred Fereira, Bill Hockins, Al Kaplan, Margaret May, Patricia Offield, Howard Peterson, Mike and Joyce Wahlig

Drawing by Jack Hamel

Cartoon from the Valley Pioneer, Nov., 1964

Logos from Danville and San Ramon

Photographs, Courtesy Museum of the San Ramon Valley

Written by Beverly Lane to accompany a Museum exhibit in 1997, edited in 2014.

