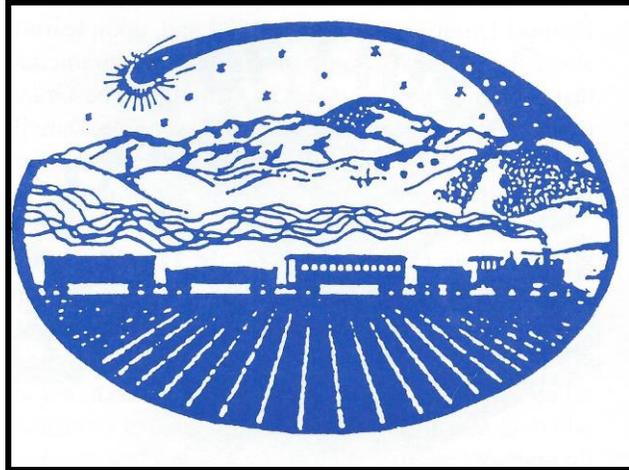


The Era of the Iron Horse

The San Ramon Valley 1870-1910



In 1869 the era of the railroad began in California and the San Ramon Valley. That year the Golden Spike was struck in Utah, linking California by rail to the rest of the country.

Even though the railroad did not come to the San Ramon Valley until 1891, the need for a train was constantly discussed by Valley's ranchers and celebrated when it arrived. The years from 1870 to 1910 saw the start of the Grange, arrival of new immigrants, and construction of new schools, churches, warehouses, roads, livery stables and shops.

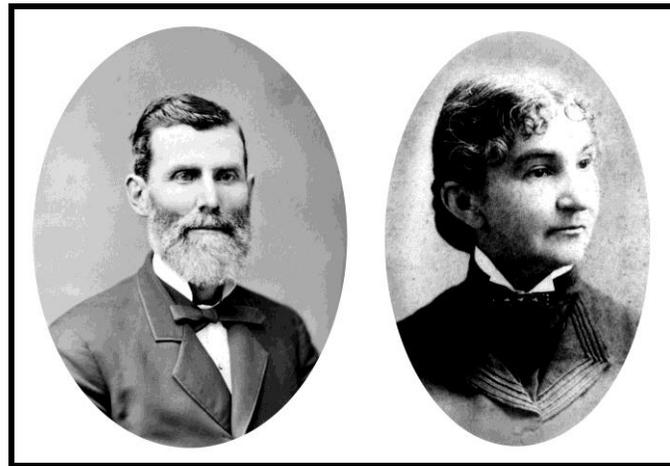
In this period the San Ramon Valley was a rural area with villages and ranches stitched together by creeks. Verdant during the winter, it dried in the summer to an oak-and-poplar-studded burnished golden landscape. In 1887 Grange Lecturer Charles Wood said that people who lived here "have reveled for years in its genial, health-giving climate, and enjoyed the unfailing products of its soil."

The Danville Grange No. 85, Patrons of Husbandry

Robert O. Baldwin and George McCamley went to a Farmers Union convention in 1872 and, upon learning about the national Grange movement, recommended that a Grange be organized in Danville. Granges promoted the welfare and education of farm families. Danville

Grange No. 85 became the heart of the Valley's economic, social and political life.

Organized on October 1, 1873 the Danville Grange became the 85th Grange in the State and the third in the County. Charles Wood was elected the first Worthy Master and thirty charter members, both men and women, were enrolled. The Grangers set up a business association and state bank and built a warehouse and wharf in Martinez. They joined Grangers throughout the state in lobbying for lower taxes and improved railroad rates.



Charles and Cynthia Wood

The Danville Grangers built a hall in 1874 and, in the early years, meetings were held every Saturday. Whole families attended, sharing food, listening to lecturers and planning special events. Discussions on woman suffrage appear in the minutes. Grangers took the lead in all aspects of Valley life. They promoted better roads and electric lights, founded the first library, began a Valley Improvement Association in 1905 and initiated the San Ramon Valley Union High School in 1909.

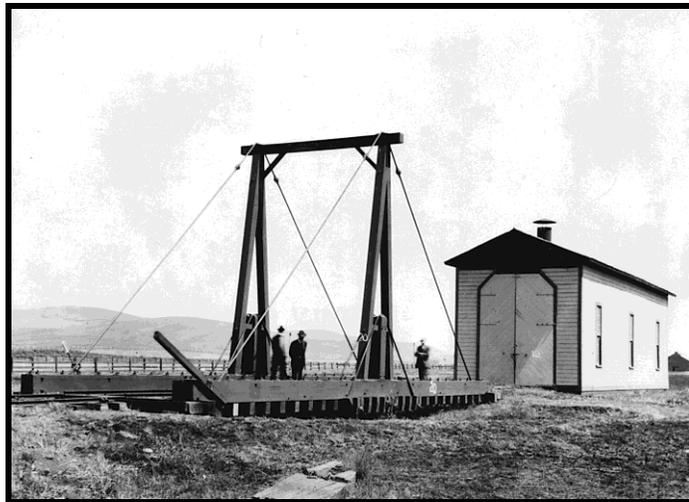
The San Ramon Branch Railroad

When the Southern Pacific Railroad finally arrived in the San Ramon Valley in 1891, there was unanimous rejoicing. In 1890 a committee composed of August Hemme, R. O. Baldwin and John A. Shuey contacted each owner along the prospective right-of-way and secured the route.

A *Contra Costa Gazette* article on June 10, 1891, described the first passenger train ride on June 7:

We do not know where it (the train) could run that would charm the traveler so much. The broad valley is covered with luxuriant growths of wheat and barley, with frequent glimpses of the deep green foliage of orchards and vineyards that seem to thrive ..wherever planted....It was...one of the genuine garden spots of the State.

The train ended at a turntable and engine house in San Ramon and did not expand south for nearly 20 years. Flag stops and warehouses were built at Hemme's ranch and Osage Station. There were major two-story depots in Danville and San Ramon with upstairs apartments for the ticket agents.



Gallows Turntable in San Ramon

George McCamley deeded land for the San Ramon station, subject to continued use by the railroad. McCamley even skipped Sunday school and church when the first train arrived. His farm diary entry read: "went down to R.R. to see the first passenger train in at 11:15 a.m. The opening of the San Ramon & Avon R.R."

The Melting Pot

During the nineteenth century new people came to the state, drawn by the California dreams of different ideas, available jobs and fine weather. The immigrants wrote home with glowing accounts of the opportunities in the state and often sent passage funds for their relatives. Germans, Danes, Swedes and Portuguese settled in the region.

The names of Humburg, Wiedemann, Bettencourt, Noia, Olsson, Peters, Freitas, Rasmussen and Peterson began to appear on voting rolls, ranches and stores. Manuel and Leonora Fereira's son William Carlos Fereira became the San Ramon Postmaster. Peder Thorup's Shoe and Boot Store served everyone in the valley for decades as they hosted newly arrived Danish immigrants. The new main street in Danville was named after John Hartz.

The Great Earthquake of 1906

The whole valley was rocked by the earthquake on April 18 of 1906. Chimneys came down at homes and one San Ramon saloon slid completely off its foundation. Astrid Olsson, who was 8 at the time, said they moved their beds to the porches because of the aftershocks. She recalled that they could see the glow of the San Francisco fire over the hills.

Refugees began to stream out of San Francisco, visiting friends and moving to the East Bay permanently. Valley residents sent 100 dozen eggs, infants suits, groceries and boxes of clothing.



Ramona Park, a new group picnic park on William Messe's ranch in Danville was set to open April 26. Instead, a special Independence Day party took place on July 4, 1906. The Odd Fellows, who supervised the event, sent 25 per cent of the day's receipts to the San Francisco Relief Committee. The park advertised fields for games, a small fresh water lake and a dance pavilion, all accessible via the train from San Francisco. With no alcohol served, the *Daily Press* stated: " The usual ice cream

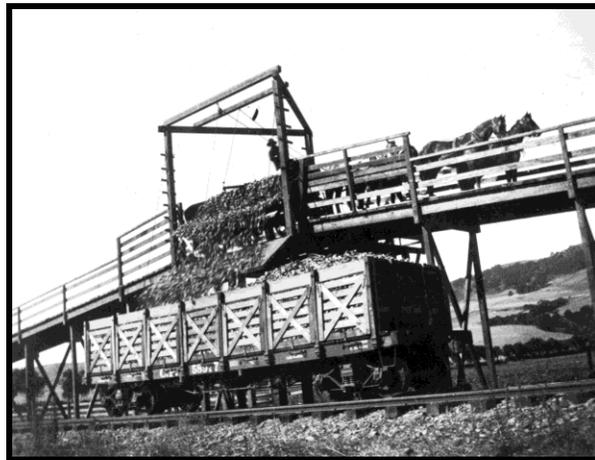
and refreshment booths will be found, all conducted in a most orderly manner."

Life in the Valley

The San Ramon Valley in the period from 1870 to 1910 produced a virtual cornucopia of farm products. In the earlier years, wheat, oats, hay and barley predominated; the *California Farmer* crowed "California is now the esteemed granary of the world."

Later almonds, walnuts, grapes and fruit crops flourished. An Italian immigrant, Giacomo Marengo, planted vines, developed a small winery and dug a 60-foot wine cellar in Alamo just off Miranda Creek.

One writer (probably Baldwin) pointed out the fruits which were best adapted to the San Ramon Valley including apples, pears, prunes, plums, figs and berries. August Hemme's 2000 acre ranch was known for its many innovations. In 1889 the *Gazette* reported that the first refrigerator car load of fruit shipped from Martinez "consisted of Bartlett pears and was shipped by A. Hemme from his extensive orchard in San Ramon Valley."



Beet dump at Baldwin's Osage Station Flag Stop

The Wood Ranch in Sycamore Valley was another well known and admired ranch. A *Pacific Rural Press* article in 1887 described it as an example of diversified farming with a large dairy herd, modern improvements in the stock barn, 200 Leghorn chickens and 200 acres of grain on land which was rested alternate years.

The small downtowns of the community provided products and services which the self sufficient farmers couldn't produce on their spreads. After

1891 a building boom took place near the Danville train station. Huge bags of beans, coffee beans and rice would be purchased at general stores such as Henry's, Cohen's, Shuey's, Hurst's and Glass and Ivory's. Often the store owners were also the Postmasters, making these establishments the centers of the communities.

Fires were devastating events, almost impossible to extinguish. The Woodside Ranch fire in 1887 was poignantly described by Charlotte Wood many years later. Her father and brother were gone when the fire started. "When the two reached home that evening, three black hills met their gaze instead of the six foot tall waving grain!"

Various fraternal orders enabled people to broaden their horizons. In the Valley there was a Masonic Lodge, a Rebekah Lodge, the International Order of Odd Fellows (I.O.O.F.), the Portuguese Union of the State of California (U.P.E.C. with Danville's branch beginning in 1898), the Neighbors of Woodcraft and many others. The Grange, combining social, economic and fraternal purposes was most important organization of the period. It hosted harvest feasts which drew Grangers from the entire East Bay to Front Street in Danville.



A Grange Chromolithograph from the 1870s

The families of the valley made their own entertainment, visiting neighbors on horseback or by buggy, reading, playing piano, viewing

stereoptican pictures, and drawing. Belle Nunes Silva said that as children: "We would slide down the hay, which father didn't like. But we enjoyed it!"



Alamo School in the Village

Activities at churches and schools provided additional opportunities to see others. Students rode horses or walked to the small grammar schools. For high school, they boarded in Oakland or San Francisco. The schools served other purposes, including meetings, plays, musical entertainments, church services and parties. Vivian Coats Edmonston recalled dances where families put their small children to sleep in the cloak closet and danced until the wee hours of the night.

Conclusion

This era ended in 1910 with Haley's Comet which flew across the sky on April 24 of that year. Mrs. Edmonston recalled the comet as a 9 year old living in Tassajara Valley. "My grandmother got me out of bed at about two in the morning to see it. It had a very bright head with a long tail. We had to stand on our porch roof to see it."

The years before 1910 were ones in which the communities of San Ramon, Danville and Alamo and the ranches that surrounded them matured and developed. This period was shaped by their lives as farm families, merchants, Grange members, and railroad patrons. Although there were still only 1,146 people in the San Ramon Valley by 1910, these communities were in many ways a microcosm of all California.

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Pictures

**Logo by John Hamel, Courtesy of the Museum of the San Ramon Valley
Photographs, Courtesy of the Museum of the San Ramon Valley**

***Written by Beverly Lane to accompany a museum exhibit in 1995, edited
in 2014.***