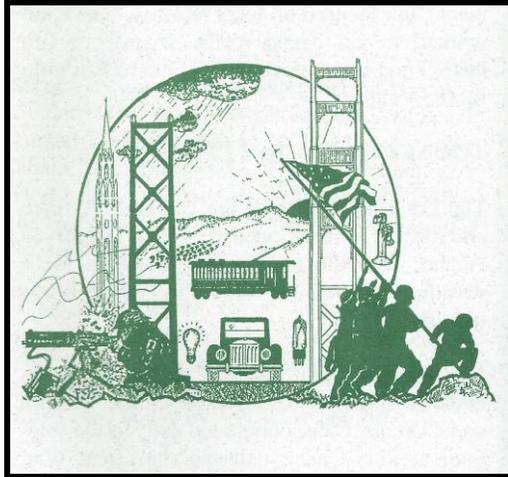


Good Times, Hard Times

The San Ramon Valley -- 1910 to 1945



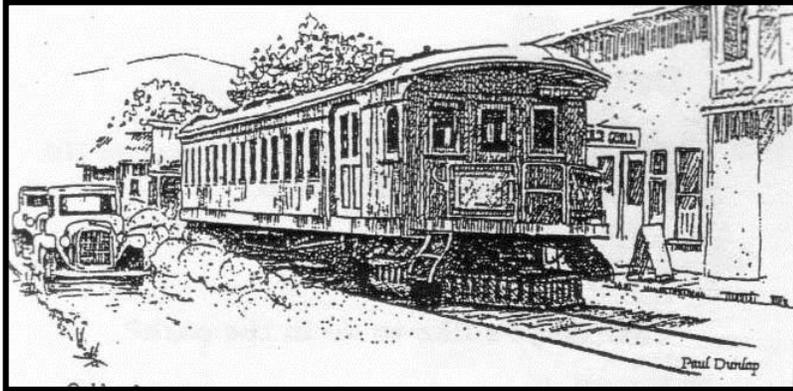
Times were hard but life was good for Californians at the start of the twentieth century. Changes were in the air and most people expected change to be for the better. Teddy Roosevelt was the epitome of such expectations.

In the rural San Ramon Valley people joined all Californians during a period which saw woman suffrage, two world wars, the automobile revolution, a depression, broad use of electricity and electric trains, the progressive political movement and the fabulous Treasure Island Fair.

In the spirit of progress the Danville Improvement Club focused on local reforms. Led by Lillian Close and the Grange, the Club worked to get paved roads, organize a fire district and promote an electric interurban train for the Valley.

Toonerville Trolley

The Danville Branch of the Oakland, Antioch and Eastern Railway opened in 1914 and served Alamo, Danville and Diablo residents for a decade. Dubbed the “Toonerville Trolley” after a popular cartoon, it was used by everyone to get to work, visit friends and go to school.



Margaret and John Baldwin took it on week-ends from the Baldwin ranch to and from UC Berkeley. Joe Ferreira and Clarence Close commuted daily to the shipyard at Port Chicago during the Great War. And Danville developer Robert N. Burgess brought prospective buyers -- including William Randolph Hearst -- to his new Mount Diablo Park Club on special trains which locals dubbed the "Million Dollar Specials".

Inventions and Change

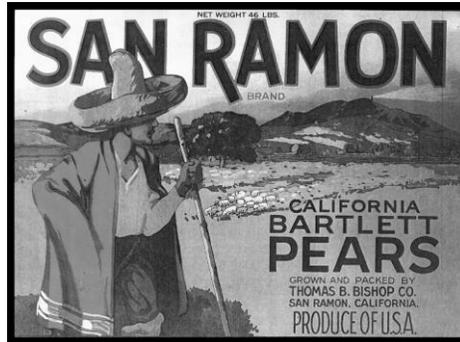
The automobile revolution showed up in the valley as residents bought Hudsons (Joe Bettencourt), Chalmers (Charles J. Wood) and Cadillacs (John Baldwin Sr.). Trucks and tractors replaced horses for farm work, reducing the need for workers. The first paved road in the county was built between Walnut Creek and Danville. Builders experimented by putting a hump down the center which made it challenging to pass other cars.

All kinds of new ways to live and communicate began in the early twentieth century. Electricity extended the day for people. No longer were irons heated on the stove or gas engines used so extensively. Telephone farmers' lines stretched out into the valleys, with eight or ten houses on a line. Viola Root, the local telephone operator, said "the other subscribers would come on to the line to listen, of course, because we didn't have any TV or radios at that time."

Walnuts Ruled the Valley

The valley was filled with orchards. One writer said "I have traveled the world . . . but nowhere found such an Eden as this." Almonds, prunes, grain and tomatoes grew well and later walnuts and pears dominated. On the surrounding hills livestock grazed and grain and

hay were produced. There were some small dairy operations. Fruit packing sheds and long hay and grain warehouses lined the railroad tracks.



Bishop Ranch Pear Label

Large ranches spread across the valley and names such as Rancho Romero (Jones), Woodside (Wood), Forest Home Farms (Boone), Glass, Blackhawk (Easton and Ward), Bishop, Macedo, Wiedemann and Baldwin became part of the landscape.

Travis Boone invented and built the most successful dehydrator in the industry and designed portable towers for hand knocking walnuts and picking dates after he and his wife Ruth moved to San Ramon in the thirties.



Harvesting on the Hills

During the Depression some ranchers lost their land to bank foreclosure. In the 1933 Danville Fire District minutes Ed Wiester wrote "Lot of talk about hard times, but as we could do nothing about it, we adjourned."

While itinerant crews picked fruit and nut crops, everyone pitched in when crops were ready. Ruth Boone ran a "ladies crew" from the immigrant camps for years. During the World War II the schools

shut down so that students could pick walnuts and the young pickers' hands took weeks to lose the husks' black stain.

A New High School for the Valley

After years with no local high school, the Danville Grange No. 85 initiated. and voters supported. a new San Ramon Valley Union High School. The mission-style school was opened in March of 1917 after students were taught in temporary locations for seven years. By 1920 it drew students from seven grammar school districts.

The lively Vivian Coats rode horseback to school and recalled being the only girl in a six-member surveying class. There were excellent sport teams in the thirties; in 1935 Bob Frick set records in the 100 and 200-yard dashes which still stand.



The new Spanish-style Union High School.

Red Letter Days

Movies, parties and special openings spiced up life for Valley residents. The Art Deco-style El Rey Theatre in Walnut Creek was a favorite destination for teen agers after it opened in 1937. Saturday night dances followed a set pattern, with the first Saturday at the Legion Hall in Danville, the third at the San Ramon Hall (built in 1911) and others in Livermore.



San Ramon Hall

There were July fourth parties, graduation parties and May Day celebrations. The "Legion Follies" included hilarious chorus lines and comedy acts performed by veterans. Josephine Close hosted an annual Presbyterian Church ice cream social in her large garden on Diablo Road.

Special area events in the thirties, including the opening of the Bay and Golden Gate Bridges and the Treasure Island Fair in 1939-40. The Wiedemann and Wood families drove over the Bay Bridge on its first day, marveling at the construction and the views both ways.

When the Broadway Low Level Tunnel (later the Caldecott) opened with great fanfare on December 5, 1937, the SRV Union High School band played and several young ladies helped cut the ribbon, including Miss Danville Mildred Lewis and Miss Alamo Joann Miles.



The First Mount Diablo celebration in 1921

On April 26, 1931, a 500-car parade began in Martinez and ended at Mt. Diablo Country Club to celebrate the end of the State Park toll road and public access to the summit. Although a ribbon cutting had

been planned at Rock City, an enormous rain and lightening storm raged all day and the honors were done at the Diablo Club gate, after an enjoyable wait in the Country Club bar by Governor Rolfe.

The Treasure Island Fair was a favorite destination in 1939 and 1940, reachable by rail, ferry and the new Bay Bridge. Pete Camacho and Wilbert Souza went every week on their day off, enjoying the parades, the water ballet, the on-stage pageants and the adult Gayway amusement area.

From 1937 to 1944 Eugene and Carlotta O'Neill lived on the foothills of Las Trampas in Danville. The Nobel prize-winning playwright kept to himself and wrote his last great plays there, including *Long Day's Journey Into Night*. Even though local residents helped out, illness and war shortages drove the O'Neills to leave.



The O'Neills' Tao House

Japanese Americans in the valley

One group of workers stood out in this period because they were Asian: the Japanese Americans. They worked primarily on tomato crops at ranches throughout the Valley. While the older generation was ineligible for citizenship by law, their children were all American citizens. The youths went to regular schools five days a week and to Japanese language school in Danville off School Street on the weekend.

Pearl Harbor shocked the nation and devastated their community. Within days Eddie Ajari, newly elected president of the Japanese-American Association, was taken to an unknown destination by the FBI. A teacher at Tassajara School tried to expel young Tatsuya

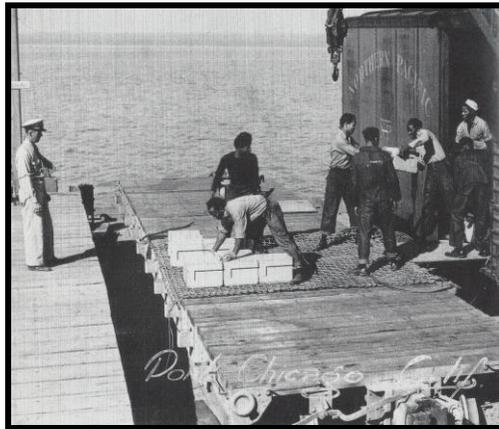
Hikido because of his race. They were yelled at and threatened as war hysteria took over.

In May, 1942, Japanese Americans of the valley met at the Danville Depot and were bused to the Turlock Fair Grounds. Later they were sent to the Gila River relocation camp in Arizona. Two young men, Ace Handa and Katsumi Hikido, were members of the much-decorated 100/442nd Regimental Combat Team in Europe.

The Wars

Valley soldiers and sailors served and died in both World Wars. The influenza epidemic of 1918 wrecked havoc as well; Rose Ferreira recalled that it lasted three to four weeks and, at her house, her mother and all eleven of her siblings were sick at once. Her uncle helped them by bringing soup in milk cans and later died of the flu.

Not far north, the largest World War II homefront explosion shook buildings throughout the Bay Area when two ships at Port Chicago blew up on July 17, 1944. Windows were blown out in Alamo.



Loading Munitions by Black Soldiers at Port Chicago

During the Second World War, buildings in Alamo and San Ramon were created to watch for enemy aircraft. People took two-to four-hour shifts, posted pictures of enemy aircraft for reference and used binoculars to search the skies. Lives were disrupted as youths were drafted and rationing became a way of life.

World War II became a watershed for California and the valley. The optimism and energy of the early twentieth century was repeated as when the war ended in 1945.

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Pictures

Drawings by Jack Hamel and Paul Dunlap

Photographs, Courtesy of the Museum of the San Ramon Valley

Port Chicago photo, Courtesy of Percy Robinson in Robert L. Allen's book *The Port Chicago Mutiny*

Written by Beverly Lane to accompany a Museum exhibit in 1996, edited in 2014.