

The History of Martinez Discussed (Continued)

The 6,565 residents of Martinez felt the effects of the 1930's. The economic diversity of County government, Southern Pacific, and Shell and associated refineries provided some financial stability. People shared and took care of one another. They continued to enjoy sports, parades, festivities, and celebrations.

National Recovery Act projects brought the Court Street Post Office and the 1933 Court House.

Three major construction projects in the Bay Area changed the demographics of the central county: the Golden Gate and Bay Bridges and the Caldecott Tunnel. The ease of transportation via the Caldecott tunnel, and the freeway and bridges opened San Francisco to Contra Costa residents.

By 1937 with the completion of the Caldecott Tunnel developers were subdividing farm land in anticipation of the building boom that was to come.

Lives changed on December 7, 1941. Many young people went off to war. Residents responded to rationing by planting victory gardens and recycling aluminum, metal, paper, and rubber. War Bonds were purchased, and the community united in volunteering.

Between 1943 and 1946, 1,348 volunteers established and operated the Martinez Canteen, which provided rest rooms, food, music, and conversation to the 401,322 service men and women who passed through town on troop transport trains.

Not all Martinez citizens fared well during the war. Several honorable Italian families, long time residents, were torn apart when they were identified as enemy aliens and were required to locate inland. Proud and industrious Japanese families were interned, in spite of the fact that many of the Italians and Japanese served in the United States Armed Forces during the WWII.

After WWII, housing subdivisions and shopping malls were built throughout the county. The older businesses and residential district of Downtown Martinez remain as the town that exists today.

During the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, the County government operations continued to provide an economic base for downtown Martinez. Shopping habits were changing. Many local residents favored the new shopping centers and malls in neighboring communities.

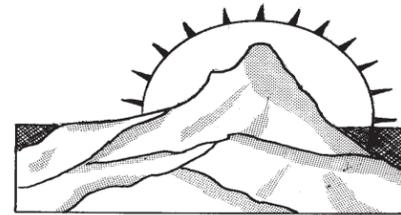
When the Benicia Martinez bridge opened in 1952, cars no longer had to come to Martinez to be ferried across the Carquinez Straits. In spite of these changes, Martinez is still one of the local communities that has an intact downtown district. This district has been centered at Main and Ferry for more than 160 years.

The population of Martinez has grown from 875 in 1880 to over 35,000 today. It is the birthplace of Joe Di Maggio, the home of John Swett, John Muir, and Congressman George Miller III. Martinez remains the county seat of a major California county and a vibrant city proud of its history.



Andrea Blachman, Executive Director of the Martinez Historical Society shared her thoughts and information with us in her enjoyable talk on the history of Martinez.

SAN RAMON VALLEY HISTORICAL SOCIETY



January 2015

ALAMO · BLACKHAWK · DANVILLE · DIABLO · SAN RAMON

The History of Martinez Was Discussed At Our November 20th Dinner Meeting

Andrea Blachman, Executive Director of the Martinez Historical Society, shared her understanding of the history of Martinez.

The Carquin Indians, part of the Costanoan Indian group, were probably the first people to live in the Alhambra Valley.

In 1822, Don Ygnacio Martinez was at the Presidio in San Francisco. He petitioned the Mexican government for land. In 1824, Don Ygnacio Martinez was awarded 17,000 acres for services rendered to the royal Spanish and Mexican armies. The Alhambra Valley was part of the grant. His eleven sons built homes and pastured cattle on land west of Alhambra Creek. Don Ygnacio retired for the military in 1836. The grant was affirmed in 1842.

In 1829, William Welch, a Scots Irish sailor decided to remain in California, and jumped ship at Bodega Bay. He married Maria Antonia Galindo and soon had a family for which to provide. In 1832 he petitioned Mexican authorities for a grant of land. His grant, Rancho Las Juntas, ran along the east side of Alhambra Creek to Walnut Creek.

At this time, the economy of Contra Costa County depended upon the thousands of beef cattle raised for their hides and tallow. These products were shipped to the east coast and to foreign countries. This was a cash crop for the ranchos. The cattle were fed on natural grasses on the ranchlands.

Except for a few fruit trees and vegetable gardens for their own use, the rancho owners did not concern themselves with farming pursuits.

A trail lead from San Jose between the ranchos to the Carquines Straights. After the discovery of gold and the influx of people, a means of crossing the straights to Benicia was needed. The mouth of Alhambra Creek was the likely place.

In 1847, Benicia resident Robert Semple established the first regular ferry service in the bay area. Two years later the Martinez Ferry became a central route to the gold fields of the Sierra Nevada Mountains.

This ferry service became significant to the development of Martinez. Records indicate that as many as 200 gold seekers and their supply wagons would be lined up at any one time.

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Building The Caldecott Tunnel Will Be Discussed At Our January 15th Dinner Meeting

Join us to learn the story of "Building the Caldecott Tunnel". Authors Mary Solon and Mary McCosker from the Lafayette Historical Society will tell us about the history of the Caldecott Tunnel's effect in the growth of travel in Contra Costa County. From the first tunnel to the 4th Bore that recently opened, we have all benefited from the shorter route into Oakland.

The meeting will be held at the San Ramon Golf Club, 9430 Fircrest Lane, San Ramon. We will gather at 6:30 pm, eat at 7:00 pm, and enjoy our speaker. We hope to see you there.

The History of Martinez Discussed (Continued)

In 1849, an agreement was drawn up between the Martinez family and Colonel Smith. Martinez was established, the first town in the Contra Costa district. Prospectors and business men flocked to Martinez to build stores and homes, or to farm in the area.

At Smith's request, a survey of the property was completed in 1849. At the request of the Welch family, an additional survey was completed. A plan was laid out. The streets, began at the shoreline and went south along fifth avenue, now known as Alhambra Avenue, and were named for early investors, residents, and Martinez families. The streets running east-west were named for San Francisco entrepreneurs as an incentive to get them to buy property. Smith sold 50 by 100 foot lots, and people began to move to the community. Bridges were built across Alhambra Creek at Main and Fourth Streets.

The town grew slowly, the surrounding area drew farmers, dairymen, and orchardists. Settlers came from across the country. Word had spread - California was a good place.

Spanish cattle roamed at large over the valley. Beef was cheap and plentiful. Most other items were brought by ship around the horn.

In 1852-1853 flour sold for \$59 a barrel, eggs \$3 a dozen, apples \$1 each. Oranges, bananas, and limes were brought to San Francisco by steamer once a month. There was plenty of gold, and wages were high. The US mail arrived once a month from New York. Postage for a letter was 30 cents.

By the late 1800's, gold miners and miners from the Mount Diablo coal fields were returning to Martinez. Immigrants from Ireland, Italy, Portugal and the Azores, Poland, and Japan came to settle.

Mr. Hunsaker built the first residence of Martinez at the corner of Alhambra and Fourth Street. Businesses sprouted. By 1849, a hotel, government offices and school, and the Masonic Lodge building had been built.

By 1850, there was an apothecary, blacksmith, merchandise stores, laundry, livery stables, and law and dental offices. Main and Third Street was the busiest section of town. Successful business men were building large and impressive homes in the downtown area.

In 1851 when the California Legislature divided the State into counties, Martinez was the only significant town on the east bay map. It was designated as the County Seat for Contra Costa County. A US Post Office was established.

The first court house was built in 1854. It provided County offices and judges chambers on the first floor, The upstairs held a large meeting hall for supervisors' meetings, and for special occasions, grand balls, and festivals.

Being the county seat brought members of the legal profession and supporting employment.

Martinez developed into a commercial center for Franklin Canyon, Pine Hill and Pleasant Hill areas, Reliez and Alhambra Valleys as well as local residents. The streets were dusty in summer and muddy in winter. Local creeks flooded.

Agriculture brought prosperity to Martinez during its first 50 years. Farming and dairy ranching continued to develop in the surrounding valley areas.

In 1856, wheat from Reliez, Alhambra, and Diablo Valleys was the most important export. The deep water port made maritime shipping possible.

In 1876, the first vessels loaded with grain were shipped out of Martinez. Banks were established, grain brokers set up offices. Foreign vessels came to ports along the Martinez shoreline.

In 1877, a grange was established. The roster of officers included the prominent local farmers. The grange allowed direct contact with shippers and customers and avoided paying commissions to brokers. A wharf was built.

By 1884, the cultivation of fruit and nuts had become as important as wheat for the Martinez economy.

Grain farming diminished in Contra Costa County after 1890 when world wheat prices dropped. Orchard and vineyard production had become successful. Commercial wine production began between 1885 and 1890.

During the 1870's, more than 150 families immigrated to the area. Sicilian and Italian immigrants developed a fishing industry into a second economic mainstay. The men lived in boarding houses and on house boats until they could build homes for their families. They built a village near Grangers wharf and along Alhambra Creek. They sent for their families as soon as they had earned money for the passage.

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The History of Martinez Discussed (Continued)

Established businesses catered to these immigrants. In 1882, two of the twelve fishing canneries operating on the Pacific Coast were located in Martinez. Thousands of pounds of salmon were shipped to Europe, the eastern United States, Australia, New Zealand, and Hawaii. These canneries also processed and packed Chad and sardines, and later, tomatoes and asparagus.

By 1912, 600 boats employing more than 1,400 workers plied the Carquinez Straits fishing. The Martinez fishing industry was the largest in California.

Fishing continued to provide a viable living for many families until Bay waters were closed to commercial fishing in 1957. These families stayed and found employment in other industries locally.

Italian and Portuguese families started wineries in Martinez. The Portuguese had truck farms in town and in Franklin Canyon and Alhambra Valley.

Prior to WWII there were several Japanese families farming in the Alhambra Valley. They built their own Japanese language school. When the Japanese families were interned in 1942, numerous members of the valley farming community cared for their land until the families were able to return.

In 1850 Beverley Holliday established the first Martinez school. There were six students. A lady from Nantucket also started an early school. In 1853, she used her kitchen as a school room. Ten years later, a school newsletter reported that there were 191 white school aged children in the Martinez school district. Three students, the first high school class, graduated in 1904. In 1909, the grammar school was located in what is now known as the Boys and Girls Club building.

John Swett, the father of California's public school system, retired to Alhambra Valley and was instrumental in organizing the Alhambra Valley Union High School District.

The first newspaper in the County, the Contra Costa Gazette, began publication in Martinez in 1858.

By 1876, Alhambra was incorporated. By 1878, Martinez became an official stop on the trans continental railroad line. In 1879, The Christian Brothers established a school on their 70 acre piece of land. A twelve acre vineyard was planted. This was the beginning of The Christian Brothers winery, now located in Napa Valley.

In 1881, a saw mill company was established. By 1886 Main Street from the County Court House to Alhambra Creek, and Ferry Street from the railroad station to Alhambra Creek had been improved. The new Martinez Hotel at the corner of Main and Ferry, offered horse drawn carriage service between the hotel and the railroad station.

As Martinez grew, it began to attract and foster culture and cultural organizations.

Fraternal organizations were chartered. A volunteer fire company was organized, Sport teams sprang up. A cemetery was established. Churches were built.

The Martinez Choral Society began offering operettas and other programs in 1886. Five young ladies started a free reading room as a public library in 1883. A public library was built on Main Street in 1896.

There were musical and theatrical productions, operas, concerts, lectures, and public dances. These were held in the halls downtown.

It was often the women in the town who took the initiative, provided the energy, often donated the land as in the library, and formed the groups to support activities and building projects.

The strong relationship between the ranching and farming families and the Martinez community continued. All came to Martinez for their commercial, civic, and cultural pursuits.

In 1891, the water company was formed and plans were developed to light the city streets.

It was the refineries, especially the Shell Oil plant, established in 1915, that gave industry to Martinez. Hundreds of families came to work and needed housing. This initiated a huge housing boom. Entrepreneurs moved to Martinez knowing that the workers would rather shop close to home. The city continued to be a commercial, cultural, and marketing center as well as a judicial and civic center of the county.

After WWI, prohibition depressed the wine industry.

In November, 1930, the Southern Pacific Railroad Bridge was completed. Until then the train cars were floated across the straits on ferries. The railroad ferry went out of business. Martinez became a main transfer point for passengers moving east to west and north to south

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