

John Balra

By Mervin Belfils

John M. Balra was a respected citizen of the community. He was a native of Portugal and was born on March 13, 1869. He was the son of Joseph Balra, who was a farmer and stockman in the old country. John acquired his education in the old country but left his native land at the age of 17 and came to America.

He came to Contra Costa County and found employment in ranching. He rented a place and started a dairy in Alameda County. Later he took on more land and continued to operate the dairy and two ranches. After continuing successfully for a number of years in his businesses, Mr. Balra bought 25 acres in the Stege District. He later acquired more land until he now had 52 acres of the choicest dairy land in Contra Costa County adjoining the city of Berkeley. This property was just north of Fairmount Avenue and Sunset View Cemetery and east of what is now Ashbury Avenue. In the center of today's Ashbury Avenue the Key Route right-of-way ran from one end of town to the other. However, tracks were never installed and trains never ran on the right-of-way.

In connection with the operation of his own ranching, Mr. Balra rented two ranches on San Pablo Creek and one in Moraga Valley. He was recognized as one of the foremost men in the community. As a stockman, he reached a high rank in the business world. He was a stockholder in the Jersey Milk & Butter Company of Oakland, in the West Berkeley Bank, in the Portuguese and American Bank, and held stock in various other concerns. He was a member of the B. P. O. E. and the Eagles Lodge of Berkeley. He was also a member of the Druids, U. P. E. C. and the I. D. E. S., a Portuguese lodge. He was known as a successful man in the business circle.

John was a dark-complexioned, tall individual and walked very straight. To get to his ranch home, which was situated on a knoll just north of the cemetery, you would turn north at Fairmount Avenue at the cemetery gate and drive up an old dirt road to his two story home. Not far from his home were his milking sheds and a number of other buildings that were scattered about nearby.

Most of the land he owned was rolling, hilly ground, except that land where the El Cerrito High School and athletic field are now located. That portion of his property, next to Fairmount Avenue, from Ashbury Avenue to Colusa, or approximately where Rockway Avenue is, was a few acres of pear orchards. A large creek was situated where the El Cerrito High athletic field now stands. Along near the creek was a group of very tall eucalyptus trees, probably planted about the same time that they planted the eucalyptus trees along the edge of the cemetery property.

1924 was the year of the dreaded hoof-and-mouth epidemic throughout California and most ranches were quarantined. Almost every rancher in Contra Costa County was hit by this epidemic and cattle were forbidden to roam off their ranches. There was nothing that could be done about the disease and at the Balra Ranch, they dug long trenches at what is now the El Cerrito High School property and shot and buried the cattle to keep the disease from spreading.

By April 19, 1924, \$400,000 worth of livestock had been lost in Contra Costa County in the slaughter of cattle in this plague. Later in years, at the location of where the cattle were slaughtered, every weekend polo matches were held for public amusement, and occasionally donkey baseball was played on the same field.

The Balra Ranch had once been the well-known McAvoy property as shown on the old county maps. All of the Balra Ranch was covered by wild rabbits, cottontail, squirrels, quail, and a variety of other wild animals. Kids hunting on the property had to be careful of the number of bulls roaming on the ranch.

At his ranch, Mr. Balra also ran the Sunset Dairy. Embossed on its milk bottles was "Sunset Dairy, El Cerrito, California, Telephone Thornwall 4100", with an appropriate emblem of the bright sun going down behind the mountains. John, at one time, was considered fairly wealthy and had one of his many men who milked cows on the ranch chauffeur him around in his 12-cylinder Locomobile. But, his wealth soon dwindled due to the hoof and mouth epidemic and other problems. Balra Drive was named for this rancher.

During the period of dog racing in El Cerrito, a number of dog owners kept their racing hounds in the old Balra stables. Also, during the day, you could see men training their race hounds on a make-shift racing course, at what is now the El Cerrito High School athletic field

It is said that John's wife left him for a doctor, a veterinarian who had worked for him. In later years this doctor, a rather short person with waxed mustache, wearing a riding habit, could be seen strolling around in this area as after the dairy business had collapsed the doctor operated a riding stable on this ranch.

John Balra spent the latter years of his life living in a home in the 700 block of Colusa Avenue not far from the ranch he had built in his earlier years, the largest dairy in El Cerrito. His ranch had been situated at what is approximately now El Cerrito High School, and tracts Havenside, Weston Village, Bonnie Heights and Fairmount Tract.

John was very kind to animals and had a number of dogs which he used to round up his cattle. He called them his rat-tail spaniels. They were the kinky haired liver colored type. When one of his spaniels died, John had a pair of elbow length gloves made from the dog's hide for his chauffeur. In those days most chauffeurs were required to wear gloves.

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