

The Community's Past part 1

By Mervin Belfils

In the early days most of the people had wells for their water supply and later water was purchased from Peoples Water Company, now the East Bay Municipal Utility District. The Sunset View Cemetery at the top of Fairmount Avenue still gets their water supply from half a dozen drainage areas that run into large wells at Carlson Boulevard near Lassen Avenue. They have tunnels that branch out in various directions accumulating the water. The water is pumped up Fairmount Avenue for over a mile through a 6-inch pipe to serve some of the needs of the cemetery. It has been said that these wells once supplied water to the Judson Powder Company behind Albany Hill. Judson had employed a number of Welsh coal miners to construct the wells for them. Welch coal miners were plentiful at that time as the Pittsburg-Antioch part of the county had a number of coal mines in existence.

The cemetery was started in 1908 and rock for their roads was from property near the site. This rock was crushed and had to be hauled several hundred yards to be in cemetery property. The cemetery had a horse drawn passenger coach wagon driven by Mr. Curry to carry the passengers who got off the streetcars at the County Line. Mr. Curry would haul these people up to the cemetery at Colusa and Fairmount Avenue. Later on in years they had a motor vehicle take its place.

The old crematory at the Sunset View Cemetery was constructed from rock gathered on the cemetery property as were the rock pillars on either side of the entrance and the fence. Both the crematory and the pillars have been torn down during expansion and remodeling at the cemetery. [Editor's Note: The expansion and remodeling took place in 1962.]

The mausoleum is not connected with the cemetery. A portion of the cemetery property was sold and the Sunset Mausoleum constructed in 1925. The founder was Arthur Edwards. They had about 7 acre of property, plenty of room for expansion and have added to the building from time to time. When the mausoleum was first built, they put a large electrical sign up that could be seen for miles around. Large eucalyptus trees soon grew taller than the sign, so they had the sign removed. The mausoleum and the cemetery are within Contra Costa County, but just outside the El Cerrito boundary line.

The Chris Hagen family were old timers in this area and consisted of seven children who all lived on what is now cemetery property. They were William, Sophia, Peter, Anna, Mollie, Josephine and Louis. All of the Hagen children were raised in this area and some of their offspring still live in the city and bay area.

John H. Davis married Sophia Hagen and they had 14 children. Some of the children were Eddie, Mary, Fred, John, Anna, George, Chris, Emma, Harry, and Louis. The Hagen family raised hay and grain and ranched all the way to the top and over the hill.

Josephine Hagen, who married Victor H. Belfils, was born at the Hagen Ranch in 1865 and died in 1913. She was buried not too far from the location of her birth.

Louis Hagen was also born in the now Sunset Cemetery area on December 13, 1860. Louis was the son of Chris Hagen, one of the first white settlers other than the Spanish. Louis married a neighbor, Katherine Sullivan, daughter of Patrick Sullivan who came west in the sixties and finally acquired farming land in Wildcat Canyon. He raised wheat, oats, and cattle, and also raised a family, five sons and three daughters.

Patrick, who in March of 1881 was a victim of a slaying, was killed on his return from Oakland to Wildcat Canyon. Robert Lyle was accused of the killing and had to stand trial.

Katherine and Louis Hagen had two children who were named Louis and Blanche. Louis was the first man from this particular area who was killed during the first World War, and they later named the American Legion Louis Hagen Post #340 after him in his honor. Blanche had a daughter Florence who married Al Buchanan.

Katherine and Louis Hagen had their home off Arlington where the Mira Vista Golf Course has the third hole. The Le Strange family also had their home near this location, nearby a small lake that no longer exists. Katherine and Louis Hagen also owned the County Line Saloon at the south end of El Cerrito.

Later, after the Hagen and Le Strange families moved from these buildings near the golf course, they became occupied by seventy-five or eighty-five Hindu people. The Hindu's worked at the Cap Works and the late Louis Navellier, old time resident, who was born in El Cerrito, says he can remember them climbing up the hill in a long line coming back from work with turbans wrapped around their heads. He says the children in the neighborhood would run away when they saw this group coming as they were afraid of them. The Hindu group only lived above the Arlington for a few years. Some of the Hindu people also worked at the Match Factory with groups of Chinese. The match factory was located in Stege and they made sulfur matches. These matches had a very strong odor but one could hardly see the flames. They were sold in five-gallon cans which could be purchased for about a dollar a can. The matches were all glued together and would have to be pulled apart when a person wanted to light them.

Not far from the Hagen property, across from the San Pablo filter plant where the catholic school is presently located between Colusa and Curry, stood the old Philip G. Galpin ranch.

Mamie Curtin moved to this ranch with her family from Oakland just before 1900 when she was just a little child. Her folks ranch reached all the way to Grizzly Peak raising hay, grain, cattle and selling milk. Mamie was enrolled in a catholic school in Berkeley and neighboring children would take turns in harnessing their horses and driving the wagons loaded with children to attend the classes in Berkeley.

Mamie later moved down to Fairmount Avenue near the present Harding School during the real estate boom in the Henderson Tapscott Tract. This was about 1907 and the real estate men had told all of the property buyers that the Key Route right-of-way would be running trains by in a couple of years, but this was never done. The Key Route right-of-way later became Ashbury Avenue.

After the Curtin family moved from the old Galpin ranch the Chapman family moved in. This family had two children who died in a fire in one of the old barns. Not too long after, the whole ranch burned down. It had stood at the location of the former Livingood family house at 311 Colusa Avenue

Mamie worked for the City of El Cerrito for a long time as Deputy Treasurer and Tax Collector until retirement in 1954. She then lived only about a block from where she was raised as a child. She passed away in 1975.

Where the old Galpin buildings had stood, Ostergaard's place of business was started, which proved to be a good paying business. His calling cards read "Peter Ostergaard's Beer Garden, beautiful view, barbecue pit, best wines and liquors, Colusa at Fairmount, El Cerrito". His place of business was well patronized and well known throughout the bay area. This is the location of the present St. Jerome buildings. He at one time managed the Monkey Saloon on Fairmount at Richmond Street. This building has since been remodeled and moved and now faces Richmond Street behind the present Texaco Service Station.

At the left of the cemetery was a large dairy around Colusa Avenue north of Fairmount at the site of the present Weston Subdivision. This was the former McAvoy property. This dairy was owned by John Balra, and Balra Drive later was named for him. His spread ran down to where the present El Cerrito High School stands. Later on in years people would gather on Sundays to watch the polo matches or donkey baseball not too far from the riding stables. [Editor's note: There were stables both at the Balra Ranch and at the northwest corner of Fairmount and Ashbury.]

1924 was the year of the dreaded hoof-and-mouth disease epidemic throughout the State of California, and all of the ranches were quarantined. Huge trenches were dug and the cattle driven into them and shot and covered over. A number of local cattle ranchers lost their entire stock. Contra Costa County (which means opposite shore in Spanish, as it is across the bay from San Francisco) was one of the counties in the state which ranked high in the animal loss from the epidemic. Almost every rancher in the county was hit by it.

If anyone broke quarantine they were arrested, cattle were not allowed to cross any road, and all animals were forbidden to roam off their ranch. Various states forbid the buying of California meats and vegetables in fear of the disease spreading and anyone handling or tending to the cattle was under quarantine. There was nothing that could be done about the disease so the animals were shot and buried to keep the disease from spreading.

By April 19, 1924, \$400,000 had been lost in Contra Costa County in the slaughter of cattle in this plague. By May 19, 1924 the State of California had completed payment of \$180,000 to Contra Costa County as compensation for the herds destroyed in connection with the epidemic. This amount was to be at a later date matched by the United States Government. Hundreds of cattle were shot and buried in what is now the property of the El Cerrito High School not too far from where a large creek had run through the property.

Reading up on the American Legion we find the Louis Hagen Post of the American Legion was organized on November 16, 1928 by Louis E. Davis, who was chosen Commander of the newly organized post. Twenty seven ex-servicemen were present at the first meeting, and Angelo Bertoli was appointed as Treasurer.

The post was named Louis Hagen Post in memory of a well known El Cerrito youth, Louis Hagen, who was killed during the war in France. The first meeting was held at Rancho San Pablo and later the meeting place was moved to Schwake Hall situated over the present Pastime Hardware.

The first activity of the post was a big whist party at Schwake Hall and a record crowd attended the party. As time went on more and more colorful events were held as they sponsored carnivals, and benefit dances for the benefit of needy veterans and veteran's widows. [Editor's note: whist was a very popular card game.]

Mathew Hodge was elected as second commander of the post and under his leadership a membership drive was started which resulted in Louis Hagen Post having one of the largest posts in the county. Ira Scott was elected third commander of the post in 1930 and his first activity as commander was the sponsoring of a Christmas Program for about 1,600 school children who were entertained by the program which brought happiness to many who otherwise would not have had a very happy Christmas and presents were given to each child. During this year through the efforts of W.F. Driscoll, Mathew Hodges, H.T. Calvert, and Blake McNeil of the Boy Scout Committee, they were able to bring their membership over the 100 mark.

The building committee, consisting of Blake McNeil, M.F., Adams, W.K. Gilmore, C.E. Seaman, Russell Rock, and William Driscoll, met with Supervisor James Long and made application for a memorial building in El Cerrito. The Board of Supervisors granted the sum of \$22,500 to purchase the site and construction of the building.

William Driscoll was elected as fourth commander of the post. One of the largest meetings ever held by the post was when he was installed as commander and many residents were present for the colorful installation ceremonies. Dr. C.E. Seaman was elected the fifth commander of the post and under his leadership the first meeting was held in the new Memorial Building at Kearney and Stockton Avenue. The new steel reinforced concrete building was one of the first memorial buildings in the county that could be used by the entire community and organizations.

There are dozens of members of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, members of the Louis Hagen Post, and members of the Auxiliary who have not been mentioned but who played a big part and worked on committees to erect this building in honor of departed heroes.

The American Legion Auxiliary Louis Hagen Post was started in 1929 with twenty five charter members. The first president was Mrs. Madine Sexton and four succeeding presidents were, Mrs. Blanche Brodt, Mrs. Laura McNeil, Mrs. Alice Lockhart, and Mrs. Lucy Redding.

The dedication of the new building was held on Saturday, September 24, 1932 with Mayor J.R. Beck welcoming the veterans and citizens to the use of the Memorial Hall. The first feature of

the dedication was a parade followed by a tremendous ball at the conclusion of the dedication. The huge parade started at Cutting Boulevard and San Pablo Avenue with W.F. Huber as Grand Marshal. The parade went down San Pablo Avenue to the County Line and back to the Memorial Building and was welcomed by Walter K. Dunlap, Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Memorial Building. I. E. Scott, past commander of the post, acted as chairman at the dedication ceremony with the committee of Blake McNeil, M. F. Aimens, Fred J. Prosser, W.F. Huber, W. McClammery, R.G. Whitaker, A. Bertolli, J.F. Garey and Charles Weden, and a number of others.

This was one of the largest affairs ever presented in this city in those days, and Mayor Beck with his four councilmen, Hans Nissen, Phil Lee, Peter Larsen, and W.F. Huber were present at the ceremonies.

Along about 1906, looking up at the hill area from anywhere along the avenue, one could hardly see any trees along the ridge at the top of the hills. Eucalyptus trees along about this time were planted all across the ridge and one of the workers was Louis Nickelson who drove teams horses that plowed the furrows so that when they planted the trees they would all be in a fairly straight line. Small trees were planted every so many feet. It is believed that most of the trees were planted so the owners of the property could call it timberland and get a grant reduction on taxes for property they owned at that time.

The eucalyptus tree was imported from Australia and was brought to this country and planted in hopes that it could later be used for building furniture. This Australian gum tree was one of a number of species brought over and planted all around the bay area for timber land, water shed, and in the hope of being able to be used for fine furniture, which never reached the expectations of the promoters who introduced it to this country. You can be sure with the rapid growth in the bay area that the eucalyptus tree will become extinct in not too many years to come.

The hillsides were all covered with the beautiful orange California poppy which is the state flower and which has almost become extinct in this area because of the city growth and lack of open space. Occasionally, you may still find small clusters of the beautiful poppy scattered throughout the city.

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