

Union School District History



WE AND OUR NEIGHBORS

By Ruby D. Howes

1975

1863 to 1975

Almaden Township—1858—a group of parents in the area of southern Ware Road met at the ranch home of John Parker; their purpose was to hire a teacher and tutor for their children. Early settlers came soon after the gold rush to settle permanently. A few of the names were Parker, Riggs, LaMontagne, Stanfield and Schofield. In November 1863, an election was held to elect three of their group to make plans for a schoolhouse and to hire a teacher. This group was headed by John Parker, Major in the Almaden Militia Unit. The homeowners made public their political sentiments by naming the newly formed district in honor of the Union. They also caused Ware Avenue to be renamed Union Avenue. The teacher would be housed in the children's homes, thus receiving room and board and a modest salary; she would stay a few weeks in each home. The residents subsisted through small acreages of grain, selling of firewood to the Almaden Mine and harvesting crops from experimental orchards. Land was worth \$30 an acre.

Historical footnote: Charles LeFranc had his Almaden Winery in operation. Land Owners could buy young trees and vines from the Louis Pellier Nursery in San Jose. Pierre Mirassou, son-in-law of Pellier, had established a winery in Evergreen. The excellent fruit crops and the flourishing vineyards skyrocketed the land value to \$65 an acre.

In 1963, a committee of interested citizens planned a Centenary celebration of the formation of the district. The issue of Curriculum Newsletter reviewed the highlights of the development of the School District, its traditions and philosophy. This history is based on that newsletter.

The Civil War continued to divide Californians. The last Confederate bandit, John Grant, was captured in Los Gatos in January 1865.

The surprise of the '70s was the gamble G. M. Harwood seemed to be taking when he bought Lone Hill, the gravelly hill area on which to plant vines. By 1871, the 66,000 vines were doing very well.

The "old" (first) school was on sleds because, as tradition would have it, the parents could not agree just where it should be placed. It was moved a couple of times in the night. Finally it was located on McCarthy Ranch, the present site of Leigh High School. Although the tax rate was low, each family with children had to take turns boarding the teacher. They also had to provide wood for the school stove. In 1871, the teacher was Miss Emily Rand, a recent graduate of the new San Jose Normal School. The teachers were unmarried women until early in the 1900s; needless to say, teachers lasted but a short time in Union District. Teachers often had extra duties such as trimming lamp wicks, keeping the water bucket clean, keeping the fire burning in the heating stove.

The first schoolhouse burned in 1872, necessitating the building of a new structure. The new school was located on an acre of land at the corner of Los Gatos-Almaden Road and Union Avenue. Mr. Chris Schofield, who donated the land, wrote in three provisions: (1) that the property must be used for school purposes; (2) must have a hog tight fence; (3) a well must be dug deep enough to supply sufficient quantity of sweet, cool water. A bell with a clear tone was purchased from the Southern Pacific and it rung forth from the bell tower.

1890 to 1892 saw the first subdivision come into the area. Several of the half and quarter section ranches were broken into smaller farms.

The We and Our Neighbors Club was organized in June of 1892. Mrs. Chris Schofield was selected president, an office she held for twenty-five years. The forming of the Club put an end to the "day at home" which had long been a tradition.

The "old" school had two front doors. The boys lined up at the right, or the east, entrance, and the girls to the left. Inside, on the boys' side, was a sink and a cloakroom. On the girls' side there was no sink. The first boy in line each morning had to carry a bucket of water to the cloakroom. A small library room separated the two cloakroom areas. In later years when two

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Teachers were hired, they taught by facing the primary desks in one direction and the desks of the older children in the other. A potbellied stove stood toward the center of the room.

Outside on the grounds there was a woodshed, carriage house and two outhouses. The acre was planted in pine trees and two oak trees.

In 1901, agitation for a new schoolhouse culminated in a vote for bonds, but the issue was defeated; the voters could not agree upon the kind of facility to build.

In 1903, the San Jose Railway extended its electric car line to Saratoga with a car stop on National Avenue, with a convenient horse hitch and bicycle parking area. However, enterprising business men were furnishing weekly delivery to the area. The Farmers Union of Campbell sent a wagon out weekly to take and deliver orders. Pierce Grocery in Los Gatos and Mr. Holland from East San Jose also delivered.

In 1913, the District was 50 years old and progress was in the air. A bond election for a new school had just been passed. An auditorium was to be upstairs for community use. In 1910, We and Our Neighbors Club built a clubhouse on the corner of Union Avenue and Los Gatos-Almaden Road with a "life long" lease from Mrs. Sophia La Montagne. The building was donated by Mrs. Maria Schofield. The Club is still very active.

Harwood Road, so short and straight, was built by the County as an indication of the Mt. Diablo Meridian line; the road lies directly north and south. Blossom Hill Road was built in the 1930s; each of the landowners having deeded certain lands to the County. Memories of early settlers recall that not all the landowners wanted to cooperate. Water, always a problem in this part of the valley, was piped in by the San Jose Water Company in 1921. Most of the farmers had their own wells, but the four dry years of 1918 to 1921 had proven that water must be imported. The Freyschlag family sold their Lone Hill Winery to the H. A. Mirassou family in 1916. With the building of the New Almaden School in 1938, attendance at Union dropped off. Many children went to the new school; this nearly caused the two-teacher school to lose one of its staff members.

In 1946, a survey of the District was conducted by Ernest Kump Company, an architectural firm of San Francisco, to determine the potential of the District and future building needs. They found the area to be primarily agricultural and determined that it would not be unreasonable to expect an enrollment of 500 students in the next 20 years. And so entered the "bedroom community". The Union School was started as a K-8 school. Parker School housed the primary

grades separately in 1953.

In 1956, Mr. Berkeley Mathews was appointed Superintendent of the District, just at the beginning of the housing boom. He faced the tremendous task of planning and construction of new buildings, the acquisition of professional staff and the development of curriculum. At first, he worked with a very small staff. A major exigence from the beginning was the development of communication with the community and the staff. He retired in 1972.

Today, in 1975, the enrollment of students is 8,200 with a staff of about 600. Mr. Arthur Doornbos is now District Superintendent and there are 17 schools in the District. The Administration Center was built on the site of the "old school" in 1963. Additional land for it was purchased from the Downing family. Our whole area has changed from fruit growing and other crops to housing development. Land prices have boomed. We are proud to be in the Campbell Union High School District.

Note: One of the schools is named for the author. Her grandfather came here in 1860 and bought land.