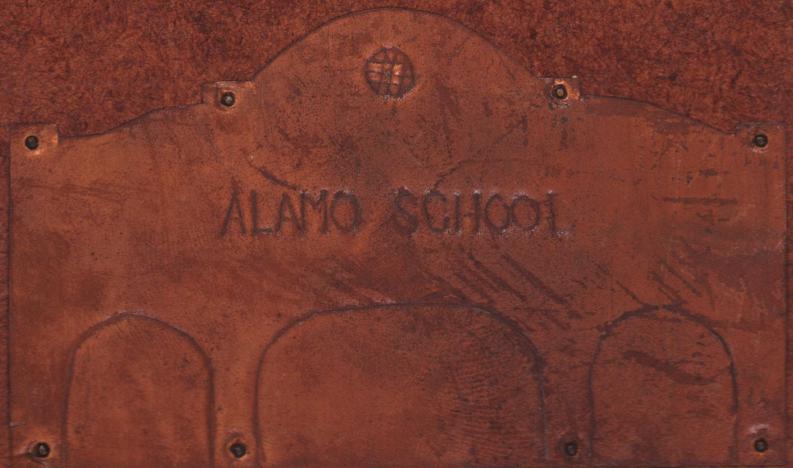


Alamo



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Madera County

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Compiled by Gretchen Gaumnitz
Alamo School
1938

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Early History of the Alamo District

The Cattlemen

From a part of a vast cattle empire to a land dotted with large cotton farms and small ranches the Alamo district of Madera County has changed in a suprisingly short time.

Although the first ranchers came here in the nineteenth century, it was less than thirty years ago that the diversified farming which has become Alamo's destiny came into being.

The first to settle in the district as far as can be ascertained, was one John Montgomery. Montgomery, a cattleman, owned one section of land and had his home where the present Bliss ranch headquarters are located.

At the end of the civil war a government yet impoverished by a war which reged four long years, and wishing to reward its soldiers, gave many of the men scrip and lands in the west.

A great many of the soldiers were not farmers and had no desire to till the soil. They then readily sold their holdings to speculators.

Accordingly, two men-- Chapman and Freeland-- bought up all of the available acreage in that district. With the dramatic suddenness of their accumulation of land, Montgomery one morning found that he had been surrounded. He had been in the custom of allowing his cattle to graze on the vast acreage of unclaimed land.

Now he found himself in the position of having a large herd of cattle and no open range. He then made a deal with Chapman and Freeland. Montgomery was to take half of their land -- they were to take half of his cattle.

Thus the two big cattle empires which were the main and only industries of the Alamo district were born. The large holdings of the Montgomery --26,000 acres-- later became the Bliss ranch.

Thus it was that the first ranchers to settle the Alamo region were cowmen. The Bliss holding, though smaller in size, is looked after today by Mr. George Bliss, Sr. and his son, George Bliss, Jr. son and grandson of the original Mr. Bliss who settled in early days. They carry on cattle raising yet together with some cotton. At the western edge of the district is found ^{today} the Horseshoe Cattle Company. Their pasture consists of the flood lands adjoining the San Joaquin River. This cattle holding was formerly referred to as the Western Meat land, property of the Swift Company of the East.

Prior to the acquisition of the cattle land by the two big cattle empires some sheep had been introduced into that section with but little success. According to old timers, several Scotchmen started flocks there but for some reason or other they did not remain. It was for the cowman to develop that vast area.

Prior to their coming there was little but vast uninhabited and wild area. When the lands were settled by the cattlemen the country was still in a comparative wild state. At that time there were of course no railroads, that being long before the coming to the San Joaquin Valley of the Iron horse.

Roads, such as they were, in many cases were little more than rude trails. The Pacheco Pass Highway which today passes through the district was a thing of the far, far distant future.

After the arrival of the cattle baronss the country r resembled many of the other old California ranchos. A great deal of the work on the ranchos was done by vaqueros, the M Mexican settlers of the region. Tall and straight they stood. They had been bred to the saddle. They were the cowhands and good ones they were too.

When the extensive Bliss holdings were obtained from Montgomery, work was begun at once for the structure of build- ings on the home ranch which was where it is located today.

The lumber resources of Madera County's Sierras were still undeveloped. Every stick of wood which went into the construction of the buildings there made the long and arduous trip by team from Stockton. Thus it was, with vast timber resources near at hand yet unknown, that all lumber was hauled overland from Stockton, some hundred miles away.

The original house on the home ranch constructed of wood obtained by such laborious means is still standing and occupied, despite the fact that modern means of construction and joining of windows and doors were not available for the carpenters.

Not only were supplies brought in by teams but hides were taken out of the region by teams through the Pacheco Pass. Cattle were taken yearly to San Francisco markets through the Pass. The drive was a long one and a tedious one,,yet once a year the cowboys mounted their horses and started the long, slow trip over the mountains.

George Bliss, founder of the Bliss ranch, made the overland trip often. He was a wholesale meat dealer in San

Francisco and would come to the Alamo district, make his purchases, and help drive the cattle to market.

Growing weary of the wholesale cattle business, he determined to become a cattleman himself. He had seen and liked the fertile pastureland of the Alamo district and decided he would make his future there.

Not only was Mexican labor used in addition to the labor of the Americans but Chinese were brought to the Pacific coast to work on the construction of the transcontinental railroad. After its completion these Orientals scattered over the west to become cooks, house boys, farm workers, and laundrymen. Nearly every ranch home in the west had its Chinese cook. The Bliss ranch had its Chinese cooks, one having passed away in 1938 at a ripe old age.

Many Chinamen did work in the fields such as haying and taking care of the family garden. Several cases are known where Chinese were used as teamsters and the old timers said they were mighty good teamsters. In fact in a great many cases they were far more reliable than the white men.

Both the Mexicans and the Chinese were famed for their great devotion to the men for whom they worked. Nearly all of the children of that period had Mexican women as their nurses and all children learned to speak Spanish fluently. Many children had reached the age of three or four before they could converse in English.

Thus it was that early life in the 60's in the Alamo district resembled that of many other old California haciendas.

The era of the large cattle ranchos was soon to pass, however. In its stead was to come the epoch of smaller and

more diversified farming.



*The original Bliss home
made of lumber hauled
from Stockton.*



*The Bliss Ranch from
the driveway - looking
north.*

The Real Estate Boom

Diversified Farming

The breakup started when Robinson, one of the pioneer Chowchilla real estate men, purchased a great deal of the land. At once it was placed on the market and sold in small parcels to farmers. According to those who knew him well, Robinson loved the lands of the Chowchilla district and his one desire was to see the country prosper. Misunderstandings developed, however, many of which could not be blamed on Robinson.

The sale of the big cattle lands came as recently as 1910. For a decade a steady migration of settlers to the newly-opened farming country came in. The majority of these new ranchers came from the middle west, although there were many from the eastern states and many from other sectors of California.

Some of the land Robinson sold himself while other parcels were sold to real estate companies who in turn put the land on the market.

Settlers came and the land men reaped the golden harvest of the sale of the rich land. Trouble, though, was to develop for some of the real estate companies became too greedy, it was said.

Land fouled by dread alkali was sold to unsuspecting middlewesterners. Alkali was a new agricultural peril to them. They were unaware of its absolute lack of fertility. True, many of them saw patches of barren, grassless ground but these were often glibly explained by salesmen.

One old timer relates how an elderly couple of the middle west bought land in the Chowchilla district sight unseen. Before the actual purchase was made, the woman asked the salesman, "If

you were my son would you advise us to buy this property, realizing that its purchase will take practically all of our earnings and savings of a life time?"

Getting Very confidential the salesman replied, "Why Mother, " and he put his arm on her shoulder, "on a stack of Bibles I certainly would I"

So after selling out their eastern possessions the couple came out west with all their savings only to see their land spotted with alkali. Asking another salesman the reason for the patches he replied, "This was once a sheep camp. The grounds were packed down in spots but once you plough it, the moisture can get in and the vegetation will come up".

But no amount of ploughing helped the land to become productive. They were among those who tried to get justice in the courts.

It was around 1920 when the accused land companies were hauled into court in Chicago to answer to charges arising from disgruntled ranchers who claimed they had been swindled. The trial dragged on for years but in time the land companies managed to escape through loopholes of the law.

Those who were unfortunate to have poor land were forced to seek land elsewhere or to return heartsick and discouraged to their native states.

Those who had purchased high quality land set about planting orchards, grain, vineyards, and other crops. The fuzzy balls of white cotton waving in the fields were still in the future.

The Pacheco Highway

A vital step in the making of the district came not from soft ploughed fields but from the gleaming concrete of an important highway.

From the Pacific Ocean over the Coast Range mountains through the Pacheco Pass came the new road. It passed through the Alamo district on its way to join the Golden State Highway down the center of the San Joaquin Valley.

For over ten years prior to the actual construction of the road various groups had heated discussions as to where the arterial should be located. It was definite it would pass through Los Banos but where to go eastward was the question. Chowchilla wanted the highway brought through the city, leaders there recognizing the benefits that would accrue from the junction of two important roads.

Another group wanted the new road to connect with the valley highway as far north as Merced while others wanted it to come as far south as Madera.

After many conferences and surveys, work was at last begun on the road in its present location. Mr. A.C. Keagle reports that there was some considerable land speculation as to just where the road would pass. He states that after construction once began, the work was carried out rapidly, most of it being done by mules.

After its construction ranchers in the Alamo district found they no longer were so far from Madera, Chowchilla, and Merced. A fast highway plus the development of better automobiles ended the isolation once known by the farmer in outlying districts.

At the present time in the Alamo District the highway's edge has given rise to three grocery and drygoods stores, five service stations, a cotton gin, and a church.

Naming the District

The School

The first school of the district was located prior to 1924 a half mile north and about a mile west of the present site. Here Sunday School and Church Services were held, as well as social meetings. It was at one of these meetings at the old school house that a discussion was held regarding a name for the district. Several suggestions were made, as Vineland because of the number of grapes grown. Sierra Vista was also mentioned but it was abandoned because of its use elsewhere in the county.

Mrs. Trowbridge, a resident of the district and present at the meeting in the old school house, states that J. M. Kilgore said, "Let's name it Alamo because there are so many cottonwoods here in the district". The name Alamo was given the school, and in time the surrounding region became known as the Alamo. The word Alamo^{itself} means poplar tree in Spanish. These cottonwood or poplar trees lined the slough which yet passes through the district. A few of the trees remain, but those at the site where Kilgore lived (Seibert's at present) were removed and replaced with fruit and nut trees.

The present school was completed in 1924, being made of stucco with a tile roof. The building consists of two classrooms and a large auditorium with stage. Mr. A. C. Keagle, a trustee at the time of its construction, relates that the design of the building was patterned after the Berenda School, only enlarged.

At present the school offers a place for social gatherings. Parties, dances (discontinued after the auditorium floor was oiled for school use), the Farm Bureau meetings of the combined

Alamo and Ashview districts meeting once a month, and the 4H Club of the School, all derive benefits from the use of the school building outside of school time. Here also the district elections are held.

A migratory school was built on the Marvin Baker ranch to provide schooling for those children living in his cotton camp. During the school year 1935-1936 two teachers were necessary at the Alamo Migratory School. During 1936-1937 three were employed and in 1937-1938 four teachers were employed.

At the Alamo School a third teacher was employed in 1936 making the usage of the auditorium as a classroom a necessity. In 1936-38 two teachers used the auditorium thus making it not necessary to build any further building. A two room building, however, was erected at the migratory school to provide for the great influx of school children.

In 1936-1937 the average daily attendance of the district was 151. The following year it rose to 185.22, due to the influx of migratory labor.



Cotton

A new crop, unknown to many Californians was to make its appearance. Southern cotton men could see no reason why that crop could not be introduced on a large scale in this region. The soil, the length of growing season, everything was suited towards the raising of cotton. Electricity had been introduced so water by pumping was possible.

Several attempts had been made by individuals to raise cotton here but none were on a large scale. The new crop however, became a great success in a few years and soon ranchers were planting nearly every piece of available land to cotton. The Marvin Baker ranch became one of the largest, having a labor camp of over 150 cabins, located on the border of Madera and Merced Counties and in the Alamo district. On the northeastern side of the district M. J. Dill maintained a camp for his workers.

With the coming of cotton a new social problem was introduced here -- labor for the cotton. At first the Mexicans did most of the picking and chopping.

In the middlewest severe dust storms and dry erosion forced refugees from desolate farms to emigrate westward. With the coming of these multitudes from the southern and southwestern states a new phenomenon arose -- the cotton camp.

Instead of small ranches with a few hired men vast ranches arose with rows of small huts. Cotton ranches became cotton cities as the "dustbowlers", as these people are often known, came to Alamo and similar California cotton districts.

Here a serious problem has arisen. Cotton like many other agricultural product is a seasonal occupation. There comes a

time when there is little work to do on the cotton ranches and numerous workers are thrown out of employment.

Burden of the care of these unemployed has fallen on the shoulders of county, state, and federal welfare agencies. It is a grave problem with no solution in sight.

Thus it has been the metamorphosis of Alamo. From a vast sparsely populated cattle empire to a land of small farms and large cotton ranches the district has grown. Whether the tendency in coming years will be towards large ranches or back to the smaller farms, the future alone holds the answer.

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