

FREMONT OLDER
A Giant in Our Valley

CALIF
071.794
OLDER

(B)

904 West Olive Avenue
Sunnyvale, Ca. 94086
Tel: (408) 739-4010

John Harrison
Homestead High School
Mary Lou Lyon, Advisor
April 13, 1984

California Pioneers of Santa
Clara County 1984 Essay Contest

Second Place High School
Category

CALIF C
SAN JOSE PUBLIC LIBRARY 101

SAN JOSE PUBLIC LIBRARY

Table of Contents

	Page
Preface	
Introducing the Giant (character sketch and physical description)	1
Growing up in Wisconsin	2
Getting ahead in California	3
Taking charge on the <u>Bulletin</u> (attacking the rail-road, graft, and corruption)	6
A changing attitude; a plea for Ruef	8
Helping prisoners; analyzing crime and criminals	10
Buying a ranch; creating a refuge	11
Aiding women of the underworld	12
Fighting for Mooney; resigning from the <u>Bulletin</u>	12
Editing the <u>Call</u> ; continuing crusade for Mooney	13
Turning to literary career	14
Bidding farewell	14
Woodhills, then and now	15
Conclusion	17

PREFACE

Most textbooks on California History devote a few lines to Fremont Older. His name is mentioned in connection with the San Francisco graft prosecution (1905-1907) and with the infamous Mooney Trial (1916). These meager references in no way tell the true story of the myriad accomplishments of this titanic human dynamo.

Lincoln Steffens called Older "the greatest editor in America."¹ But he was so much more---an untiring crusader, a valiant reformer, a dedicated philanthropist. Most of all, he was an extraordinary human being whose regard for truth was paramount.

It is the intent of this author to pay some small tribute to this remarkable man by setting forth the highlights of his exciting and edifying life, and by presenting the story of Woodhills Ranch, which was his home and his dream. It is this writer's hope that the treatise that follows may kindle in the reader a tiny spark from the flames of compassion, tolerance, and brotherly love that blazed in the heart of Fremont Older, our own local hero.

¹ _____, Diaries of Mrs. Cora Baggerly Older
(Los Altos:Foothill Community College District, 1971), p. 1.

FREMONT OLDER
A Giant in Our Valley

Many illustrious men and women have left an indelible imprint upon the rich and fertile soil of Santa Clara County. These ancestors have bequeathed to us a priceless legacy, a cherished heritage. Within their ranks there looms a veritable titan--a giant, in both the literal and figurative sense--who, for twenty-two years dwelt in a house on a hill in our Valley. Almost fifty years have elapsed since he was laid to rest on his beloved Woodhills Ranch in the foothills of the Santa Cruz Mountains, just beyond the city limits of Saratoga. But his memory lingers on in the minds and hearts of the citizens of Santa Clara County. This gentle giant was Fremont Older.

As a newspaper writer and editor, he was feared and revered; he was idolized and ostracized. His news was sensational, defending truth and justice and attacking evil and corruption. He encouraged the outcast, the lowly, and the downtrodden to set down the details of their sordid, pitiful lives. He published these confessions as human-interest stories to evoke public sympathy and initiate reform. Fremont Older made people see themselves as they really were. He believed there was much bad in good people

and much good in bad people. His host of friends included millionaires and murderers, politicians and prostitutes, judges and jailbirds. He offered friendship and help to everyone, neither asking questions nor imposing conditions.

Physically, he was huge and impressive. He stood tall and erect, so that his massive frame took on a distinguished and regal bearing. He was rather good-looking, with finely-chiseled features. He had a dominant nose. His lively, twinkling, deep-set eyes belied his otherwise austere countenance. He had a carefully-trimmed, dark, sweeping mustache. A fine Havana cigar perennially jutted from his lips at a jaunty angle. He was always impeccably dressed in tailor-made London apparel. He usually wore a wide-brimmed fedora pulled down over his brow, perhaps to conceal a hairline that had been migrating since his youth. His deep voice possessed a commanding tone, and when he spoke, he gently twisted his long slender hands in gesture to impart emphasis. Often, he signalled with his cigar to stress an important point.

In order to know and understand the man called Fremont Older, we must journey back in time to 1856, and focus our attention on the frontier near Appleton, Wisconsin. Here, on August 30, as the ominous clouds of war gathered and our nation threatened to destroy itself, the namesake of General John Charles Fremont of California entered the world in screaming protest.

The family was barely subsisting. When Fremont was six years old, his father died of dysentery contracted while serving in the Civil War. The farm was sold, and Fremont, his mother, and his brother moved to Appleton. Here Fremont worked doing odd jobs for the townspeople, attending school when possible. At the age of eight he became a janitor in the school. Two years later, he was working sixty hours a week in a rake factory.

Although he had less than three years' formal schooling, Fremont Older was an avid reader. He idolized Horace Greeley and voraciously devoured and digested every word of print in Greeley's Tribune. He determined to go West and become an editor. His mother had remarried and had relocated in Sacramento, leaving young Fremont to fend for himself. He found work as a "printer's devil" on a local newspaper in Berlin, Wisconsin. He learned to set type and to run the presses. He moved from job to job and from city to city. After numerous setbacks and countless frustrations, he reached the Golden State.

Fremont Older was sixteen when he arrived in San Francisco in 1872. Times were hard. Often he found work only one day a week. He grew disillusioned and disheartened. Having heard tales about the Redwood Forests of Mendocino County where land was free for the taking, he resolved to become a pioneer! He settled in the forest, built a shelter, raised vegetables, and worked at a nearby

lumber mill. In this shady, secluded, tranquil environment, Fremont Older experienced an inner peace and happiness he had never known before. But after a time, the yearning to pursue his career in journalism reawakened, and so he returned to the Bay Area once again.

After obtaining his first real newspaper job in Redwood City as a printer on the Weekly Journal, he ascended rapidly to the status of reporter, and then to co-editor and co-owner. But soon the partnership failed. The Weekly Journal was purchased by and merged with the Redwood City Times-Gazette. Fremont Older became its reporter and quickly advanced to the position of editor. He wrote lively and thrilling news articles, always delving deeper to get "the story behind the story." He sent several of his local articles to the San Francisco Chronicle and was rewarded with the title of correspondent for San Mateo County for the Chronicle and later for the Alta.

Opportunity knocked again for Older when the San Francisco Call, the top-selling newspaper in the city at that time, made him an offer to join their reporting staff. He accepted eagerly and soon gained recognition with his sensational "scoops" and appealing human-interest stories. He became "star reporter" on the Call. In 1893 he was sent to Sacramento to do a report on the State Legislature. He was appalled at the widespread corruption and subterfuge that existed within that law-making body.

It was while covering this assignment that he met Cora Baggerly, a vacationing university student from Clyde, New York. They married within the year.

Since his arrival in California, Fremont Older had become more and more incensed over the increasing tyranny being wreaked on the public by the Southern Pacific Railroad. By 1880 its power throughout the state had become absolute. It dominated both major political parties; it dictated all law and all government. It controlled public opinion by bribing the press in exchange for "friendliness." By cleverly falsifying its financial records, its greedy grip of steel had extracted millions of dollars from the unsuspecting populace. A federal investigation had been conveniently "whitewashed" to protect the mighty railroad barons. Fremont Older, enraged and outraged by this grave injustice, was forced temporarily into restraint. For, after all, he was but a reporter. "If I were an editor", he vowed savagely, "I'd fight the railroad."² Fremont Older would not have long to wait to make good his threat.

Shortly after his marriage, Older left the Call to to become city editor of the Post. A few months afterward, R. A. Crothers, part owner of the Call offered him

² Evelyn Wells, Fremont Older (New York: D. Appleton-Century Co., Inc., 1936) p. 83.

the city editorship on that publication and he accepted. One year later, the Call was sold, Crothers assumed half interest in the Bulletin, and Fremont Older became its managing editor in 1895.

The Bulletin, tottering on the brink of bankruptcy, presented a monumental challenge to Older. Rescuing the dying newspaper would make him a hero; allowing it to die would mean his ruin. He forged ahead, restructuring the entire dreary format of the paper, sensationalizing it as much as he dared. He emblazoned huge headlines on the front page to attract attention. He printed thought-provoking articles and columns that catered to a variety of special interest groups. He employed women writers on his staff to appeal^{to} the feminine tastes. He enlivened the sports page and featured local news. He ran contests and awarded prizes. His ingenuity transformed the Bulletin into a people's paper and changed its destiny. His lurid, up-to-the-minute coverage of the horrifying "Crime of the Century", the Durant Murder Case, sent the Bulletin's circulation soaring. In a few short months, Older had achieved the impossible.

As his newspaper flourished, Fremont Older's reputation grew; his power and influence rose steadily. He decided the time was ripe for utilizing the strength of the Bulletin in a concentrated effort to defeat the mighty

Southern Pacific Railroad. Having persuaded James D. Phelan, a rich, personable, upstanding citizen to run for mayor against the Republican "Railroad" candidate, Older waged a successful campaign through the Bulletin. Phelan was elected in 1895, and again in 1897 and 1899. Older had chosen well. The honest mayor and his Board of Supervisors challenged the railroad bosses, fought crime and graft, and San Francisco prospered.

During the mayoral election campaign of 1901, Fremont Older urged Crothers to allow the Bulletin to support the reputable Democratic candidate, Joseph S. Tobin. But the owner of the newspaper insisted upon backing Asa R. Wells, the Republican, who was the Southern Pacific's choice. Crothers had accepted \$75,000 from the railroad for this "favor". When Eugene Schmitz, the Labor candidate was elected, Older felt that the Bulletin had betrayed the public. For Schmitz, while ostensibly portraying himself as the savior of the working man, was, in reality, a pawn of Abraham Ruef, political boss. During the Schmitz regime, graft and corruption ran rampant. Older, after "cleaning up" the graft on the Bulletin, lashed out mercilessly against the Ruef ring. He uncovered scandal after scandal, from the petty extortion paid by gambling houses and prostitution establishments to the large-scale graft extracted from large corporations for franchises and

licenses. Through the columns of the Bulletin, Older exposed millionaires and business magnates, senators, judges, supervisors and police. Many prestigious friends of Fremont Older, who were profiting from the graft, turned against him. Ruef framed a strike against the Bulletin; later the paper was boycotted as anti-union. Older's life was threatened, and on several occasions he narrowly escaped death. He was kidnapped at gunpoint. But still he fought on. In 1905, when his efforts to prevent the re-election of Schmitz failed, Older still continued his crusade to save the city. Even the great San Francisco earthquake of 1906 did not prevent Older from getting the Bulletin onto the streets. He had to get Ruef! Having secured financial backing from millionaires James D. Phelan and Rudolph Spreckels, Fremont Older obtained the assistance of attorney Francis Heney and detective William J. Burns in gathering evidence to indict the grafters. The graft prosecution continued for three years. Overwhelming evidence was produced against Schmitz, Ruef, the mayor's Board of Supervisors, and against Patrick Calhoun, President of the United Railroads. But despite this, only one man, Abraham Ruef the attorney, was convicted. He was sentenced to serve fourteen years in San Quentin on extortion charges.

Upon analyzing in retrospect the sequence of events surrounding the graft prosecution, Fremont Older totally reversed his previous philosophy. He became firmly con-

vinced he had used the wrong approach. Instead of pursuing the men who were promulgating the evil, he should have been dedicating his efforts to undermine the forces that controlled them. Those forces--lust for power, control of the masses, greed for money---still existed, corrupting more men. He thought of Ruef. The man's biggest crime lay in his having been discovered. Others, guilty of far greater evil than he, had gone free while Ruef bore the punishment. It was not Ruef who was to blame, Older reasoned, it was the "System", the dissolute environment. He reviewed his own motives in the struggle for this worthy cause. Were they not tainted with the desire for personal acclaim and success for his newspaper? It was now very clear to Older. No more would he hate and hunt the evil man; he would loathe and pursue the destruction of the evil manifesting itself through the man.

As these thoughts seized him, Fremont Older felt compelled to talk to Ruef, to beg his forgiveness. He went to San Quentin. Older's sincerity touched Ruef; they talked. Older began a plea for mercy for Abraham Ruef. He was as zealous in his work for Ruef's release as he had been for his conviction. Older's friends did not comprehend this change in attitude. They believed their champion had deserted the cause. But Older, undaunted, battled long and hard for Ruef's parole and saw his release after having served five years.

During the half-decade that Fremont Older battled for Ruef's parole, he visited him often at San Quentin. The editor was appalled by the conditions existing within the facility-the filth and the horror, the degradation and the punishment, the injustices of the penal system. Older conversed with many of the inmates, urged them to tell their stories, and published these accounts. Thus, the public gained a new understanding and sympathy for these incarcerated unfortunates. This gradually led to the improvement of physical conditions in prisons, initiated scientific research on criminology, and revolutionized penal institutions, not only in California, but in other states as well.

Through his close association with prisoners, Older came to alter his opinion as to why criminals act as they do. Previously he had believed that men turned to crime because of an unfortunate experience in their lives. But gradually he became convinced that the criminal brain is somehow different; that it possesses a pathological twist or deformity that produces abnormal behavior. "I wanted to strike deeper, to dig at the very roots of the causes of evil which I had become convinced jails would not cure."³ Older believed that the way to help criminals was through

³Fremont Older, My Own Story (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1926) p. V. (Foreward)

kindness and mercy. Jails serve only to inflict suffering and instill bitterness, hatred, and desire for revenge. He asserted that prisons fail to consider that abnormal *men will do abnormal things* and that they cannot be made "good" by law. Fremont Older abhorred capital punishment and waged a long, but unsuccessful battle against the death penalty.

At about the time that Fremont Older launched his crusade for criminals, he purchased Woodhills Ranch in Santa Clara County. Mrs. Older personally supervised the construction of the large country house that became their permanent home. It was here that Fremont Older rediscovered peace, contentment, and solace. Many rich and famous men came to Woodhills-Clarence Darrow, Carl Sandburg, Lincoln Steffens-all friends of Fremont Older, drawn to him by the magnetic charisma of his honesty and affability. Other friends came also-ex-convicts, derelicts, unfortunates-people who loved Fremont Older and had experienced his deep humanity. He welcomed all of them. Many prisoners for whom Older had obtained parole came to the ranch to do odd jobs as they tried to work out their futures. Under Older's patient and kindly supervision, they painstakingly began the difficult transition from a caged existence to a life of freedom. "To be at Woodhills Ranch was to be above the world, above the battle, above the mean and little things...to relax after struggle and before

redescending into strife...(Older) grew fruit there and vegetables, and possibly grain, but what this self-styled pessimist mostly grew, on those golden acres, in that enchanted area, was hope."⁴ Older awakened at five each weekday morning. He drove his white Steamer to Fremont Station (named in his honor) at the juncture of Prospect and Stelling Roads, and then traveled by rail to San Francisco. His weekends were spent at Woodhills, strolling the hills with his dogs, relaxing at the poolside, reading or writing in his adobe study, entertaining guests, or seated in meditation on his favorite bench under the spreading oak tree.

Fremont Older did not restrict his philanthropy to prisoners. He extended a helping hand to anyone who reached out for it. He shocked the entire city by publishing "A Voice from the Underworld", the pitiful story of a prostitute seduced by poverty into a hopeless existence. Hundreds of women in similar circumstances appealed to Older for help. He tried to find jobs for them, to lead them along new, happier paths. The Bulletin carried their letters and their stories. This exposé was instrumental in closing "The Line" and diminishing vice in San Francisco.

In 1916, Loring Pickering, a nephew of Crothers and half-owner of the Bulletin, arrived on the scene and com-

⁴R.L. Duffus, The Tower of Jewels (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., Inc., 1960) p. 106.

menced to dictate new journalism policies to Older, seizing every opportunity to criticize and oppose the editor. The mounting tension reached its peak during the Mooney trial. Thomas J. Mooney, a labor agitator, was tried and sentenced to death by hanging for having hurled a bomb into the line of march during the Preparedness Day Parade in July, 1916. Ten people had been killed; more than fifty injured. Mooney's conviction was based on the testimony of a single eyewitness. Although the defense had provided conclusive evidence that Mooney was nowhere near the scene at the time of the explosion, he was found guilty. Mooney's unpopularity had made him the scapegoat. Fremont Older had obtained new evidence, letters that clearly showed that the eyewitness was unreliable. He printed the letters in the Bulletin, incurred the wrath of Pickering, and was publicly labeled as a Mooney sympathizer and collaborator. When ordered to refrain from printing anything further concerning the Mooney case, Older resigned from the Bulletin rather than compromise his integrity. Shortly thereafter, Older received a message from William Randolph Hearst. It read, "Come to the Call. Bring the Mooney case with you."⁵

After twenty-three years on the Bulletin, Older left to edit the Call, exhibiting the sensational, provocative style that was his trademark. He continued his plea to save

⁵Wells, op. cit. p. 311.

Tom Mooney. Mooney was granted a reprieve by President Woodrow Wilson, and his execution was postponed. A secret Federal investigation through wire-tapping disclosed that Charles Fickert, the District Attorney, had framed Mooney and had bribed the so-called eyewitness to perjure himself. This and other shocking revelations concerning the judicial system were documented in the Densmore Report. Older, through an influential friend, secured a copy of the report and printed its findings in the Call. The Densmore Report became the greatest "scoop" of his entire career. Mooney, however, was not released. He was sentenced to life imprisonment. Older fought for eighteen years for Mooney's release, but to no avail. It was in 1939, four years after Older's demise that Thomas Mooney became a free man.

Fremont Older, who had been the driving force behind so many talented writers on his staff, launched his own literary career at age sixty-three. He began with an autobiographical account of his years on the Bulletin, called My Own Story. It was published first in serial form for the Call and later, as a book. Older then wrote a recollection of his boyhood memories, Growing Up. Later, he and Mrs. Older collaborated to write George Hearst, California Pioneer, the life story of the father of William Randolph Hearst.

On March 3, 1935, as he was driving home from a

Sunday outing in Sacramento, his automobile eased slowly to a halt. The giant sighed, and slumped at the wheel. Time had run out for Fremont Older.

For a time after his death, Mrs. Older remained at the ranch, continuing her husband's work in the rehabilitation of prisoners. But then, although Mrs. Older still retained title to the property, she left Woodhills. For decades the house lay abandoned, left to the ravages of time.

It had been a beautiful and unusual old house. Built in 1913, presumably by architects Frederick Wolfe and Charles W. McCall its design was meticulously planned by Mrs. Older. It was basically rectangular in shape and totally devoid of the intricate adornment characteristic of most structures of that era. Like its owners, the house was not showy or pretentious; it possessed an aura of elegance wrought through simplicity. It had a flat roof and gray shingled sides. Large windows framed various views of the valley. The front terrace overlooked the rose gardens. In 1923 an adobe structure was added, built of materials that Mrs. Older had salvaged from an 1847 adobe that was being dismantled in San Jose. This became Fremont Older's study and private sanctuary. The large swimming pool was constructed at about the same time.

The house was close to total collapse when the Mid-

peninsula Open Space District acquired it along with several hundred acres of surrounding lands, in 1975. Since the District lacked funds to restore the crumbling house, it was scheduled for demolition in 1977. But concern on the part of local historical groups led to the discussion of ways to preserve and restore the edifice. Mr. and Mrs. Mort Levine came forward with a proposal whereby they agreed to live in the house and to assume all costs necessary to restore the house and its surrounding gardens, in exchange for a 25-year lease on the property for a token dollar a year. Members of the Historical American Buildings Survey prepared detailed drawings so that workers could rebuild the structure as it originally existed. Great care was taken to preserve its historic authenticity. As the restoration progressed, Woodhills was named to the National Registry of Historic Places. On June 1, 1980, the house was opened for viewing. Since that time, it has been made available for public touring three days each year. The original acreage of Woodhills Ranch, plus several hundred acres adjoining the original property, now comprise the Fremont Older Open Space Preserve. Located just beyond the city limits of Saratoga and Cupertino, the 734-acre Preserve of rolling hills, fields, and woodlands contains several miles of hiking, bicycling, and equestrian trails that attract nature lovers from the surrounding environs.

This concludes the chronicle of Fremont Older and Woodhills---the story of a man who would not be beaten and of a house that refused to die. We, the citizens of Santa Clara County, proudly claim both as a part of our rich local heritage. Let us not forget this mighty Colossus, for he was indeed one of us. He is our own gentle giant who sleeps near his house on a hill overlooking our glorious Valley.

Bibliography

- Bush, Leon G. and McComb, Delmar M. Jr., The California Story, Belmont: Fearon Publishers, 1975.
- Duffus, R. L., The Tower of Jewels, New York: W. W. Norton and Co., Inc., 1960.
- Older, Fremont, My Own Story, New York: The Macmillan Company, 1926.
- Rolle, Andrew F., California: A History, New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1969.
- Wells, Evelyn, Fremont Older, New York: D. Appleton-Century Company, Inc., 1936.
- _____, Diaries of Mrs. Cora Baggerly Older (1916-1923), Donna R. Harris, Editor, Los Altos: Foothill Community College District, 1971.
- _____, Santa Clara County Heritage Resource Inventory, San Jose: Santa Clara County Heritage Commission, 1979.
- _____, "Q.: What Happened to the Fremont Older House? A.: Imagination Triumphed Over Decay", Open-Space, Los Altos: Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District, No. 4, Fall 1980.
- _____, "What to Know Before You Go" (Fremont Older Preserve), Your Open Space Preserves, Los Altos: Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District, 1983.
-