

History Written in the Blossoms

by

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Preface

In the little over 12 years I have lived in Santa Clara, I have grown very fond of this city. I discovered just how fond of it I was, when two years ago I took a job in San Francisco, and after much deliberation decided to manage the 50 mile each way commute rather than move. I think that what I appreciate most about this town is its sense of community in a world that can sometimes be so hectic that its hard to find the time to smell the roses. I love our proximity to Rancho San Antonio, the short trip over the hill to Half Moon Bay, the beauty of Mount Hamilton, our nearness to the foothills, and I shamelessly admit I have fallen under the spell of the rolling 37 acres of open land that is the Marchese Cherry Orchard. Things are changing ever more quickly. Sometimes I think we tend to underestimate the value of what we have. I fear that in our haste to progress we will lose something so valuable that it cannot be replaced; the treasure of our open land, trees as free as the seasons. That is why I have written this essay.

When local historian Clyde Arbuckle had his Santa Clara newspaper route, the valley was still an agricultural community awash in orchards and fields. He says he remembers it just like it was yesterday. But that was 1917. This year Clyde turned eighty-eight years old, and the last of the cherry orchards on his once rural route is about to disappear. If it does, along with it will go the city's best living symbol of the lush, green heritage that once inspired countless pioneers to move west and settle the valley.

The Marchese Cherry orchard, located at the corner of Lawrence Expressway and Homestead roads has been the subject of some of the hottest controversy Santa Clara has known in years. And it isn't a wonder. The 37 acres of land is the last substantial open space left in the city of Santa Clara, a city that once prided itself on its beauty, and the rich agricultural soil that made it a mecca for farmers and growers of fruit.

In July of 1989, the San Mateo-based Prometheus Development Company submitted a plan to transform the nearly 40 acres of orchard into an industrial park crowned by a 10 story, 1.5 million square foot office tower. The industrial complex was to have been accompanied by 400 apartment units on the land. The proposal sparked enough of an uproar in the community that the company decided to alter the scale of their project. Nearly a year later, they came back with a slightly minimized plan to build 1.2 million square feet of office space, this time only six stores high, mixed in with single family homes. Concerned about reduced home values, the

added problems of traffic congestion and pollution development would cause, and loss of the visual beauty of the orchard itself, homeowners in the surrounding area still were not satisfied. But by this time most seemed resolved to the fact that the land would, ultimately be developed.

Some of us are not.

It is a tough question. One of the toughest Santa Clarans who care about the city's future, as well as its past have had to face. It is also a question that can break a heart. The orchard is, after all, the last remaining symbol of what once made Santa Clara great. It's faithfully flowering acres of cherry trees each spring are testament to the fact that this valley is situated on some of the most fertile agricultural land on the earth; a point that might be too easily forgotten once it is covered completely with the office buildings and parking lots that somehow have come to be spelled progress.

As a member of this community, I am wrestling with the question of what it will be like to live in Santa Clara without the rural beauty of the Marchese cherry orchard. The property is after all privately owned. And because the Marchese family has kept the orchard in the family since the 1920's, while other farmers were selling off their land, it seems grossly unfair to try to prevent them from selling it when they choose. Yet, it's tough to deny that this land is a valuable part of our city's legacy. Somehow, over the years, as urbanization crept more and more certainly into the surrounding areas in the city,

the presence of the orchard began to take on an increasing historic and asthetic value that makes it more than ever an intrinsic part of the city's character. One that we should think carefully about before letting it go. Because once it is gone, it will never be back.

I remember the impact the orchard had on me the first time I saw it. Just having arrived in California, I was driving in to Santa Clara to look at an apartment that was for rent. It was a late summer afternoon, and I was headed east on Homestead road when I caught my first glimpse, of what was to become my visual refuge over all the years I was to live in Santa Clara. There was the cherry orchard, in full summer bloom, acres of trees, their leaves the dark shiny green they get in the deep afternoon sun. At that time the Marchese family was still selling cherries from the orchard. I looked at the long driveway leading up to the house, and envied the people who lived there. The orchard was something special. I still remember the way it made my heart leap. I had heard that the valley was once alive with farmland and fruit trees, but here was living proof. It was an invaluable glimpse of the land we lived on. And of what it must have been like for those who had come before. I remember multiplying the orchard many times in my mind trying to imagine the magnitude of the beauty that this valley must have had.

But nothing can stay the same. In the twelve years I have lived here, the gas station at the corner of Homestead and Keily roads went from being owned by an older German mechanic who knew how to repair an Renault, to an AM PM self service station complete with

minimart. By Th' Bucket has gone from a rollicking, crowded seafood dive with the best linguini and clams this side of Maine, to a near fern bar, that fortunately still serves a mean linguini. High tech companies have covered most of the land north on the Lawrence Expressway with a sea of flat topped high tech buildings. Saturdays have become official cruise nights on the El Camino. So why should the Marchese cherry orchard be expected to stay the same?

Perhaps because it has been the barometer of the changing seasons for so long. In a society like ours, where the pace of life is measured in commute hours, time in front of computer screens and harried business lunches, it is good to come home to a view of the trees. The long rows of Cherry and English Walnut swaying in an autumn breeze, the black branches looking wild against a metallic winter sky when you're driving home from a harried afternoon of Christmas shopping, the blaze of white blossoms in spring, and the rich endless summer deep green that the orchard takes on in August, are a part of what keeps living in this city alive for me. And more, those trees reach back in time to touch this city's history.

Maybe I spent too much time in cherry trees when I was a child. Or maybe it is because I saw an orchard disappear once that I am so sad to see this orchard go away. I remember, several years ago, working in a new building near the corner of South First Street and Orchard Parkway in San Jose. Shortly after our company had moved in to the building, my friend and co-worker Patsy, and I discovered a path, leading along the creek behind our sleek, red brick office building. It

led to the back of a cherry orchard at the corner of the two roads. At that time, the orchard was already zoned for development, but the trees still bloomed.

Walking down the dusty pathway on a lunch break, heading for the orchard was our favorite part of the day. I remember making our way down the little slope, off the path and into the lush wild grass that led into the trees. It was spring, and the orchard was in full blossom, very bright, a broad whispered white. We took our lunch and headed for a shady spot, found some wild lettuce, which we nibbled as we talked. It felt so safe. Row, after row the trees so neatly planted maybe a century before, were oblivious to current politics. They continued to grow. And then, one day they were torn down to make way for a new office complex. More jobs. Less space. San Jose had lost another little piece of its heart to commerce. Since then the street's name Orchard Parkway has always struck me as ironic. They kept the name but threw away the orchard. Would anyone in years to come understand that the orchard was more than just a name. It was there. I know because I once sat under its shade.

Of course most of us cannot get that close to the Marchese cherry orchard. It is private property, and it is the Marchese family's home. Still, we can see it. And I have been compelled on certain mornings, to plan my route so that I could drive past the orchard and catch a glimpse of the way the trees look in that day's particular light. Spring after spring I would tell myself, I must come out here with my camera someday and photograph these trees. Last spring, after the

Prometheus plan became public knowledge, I did. Standing on the edge of the Lawrence Expressway and Homestead road, just outside the perimeter of the land on a windy spring morning, I photographed the black branches with their proud wild blossoms. And I caught them just before the leaves turned to green.

I knew that when I left this area, I would want to have at least some photographs of the little patch of rural beauty that drew me to live here in the first place. I wonder if others feel the same. Last night as I was coming home from dinner in Berkeley with a friend, the subject of the orchard came up. She didn't seem to see a problem with development. "After all," she said, "if it weren't for Prometheus having built the apartments I live in, I wouldn't be able to live in Santa Clara. If people want to hang on to this beautiful open space, they should have thought about it a long time ago." She has lived in the valley for two years. She has a point.

I also spoke with one of the members of the Association for Good Government, a group that is currently involved in trying to limit the development of the Marchese orchard so that it has the least adverse affect on the surrounding community. "I used to scream and holler no growth," he said, "but after a while, I discovered I wasn't getting any support." At this point, he said the question has become, "how much density will there be." Most of the Westwood Oaks group, homeowners whose property borders the Marchese land seem to be resolved that the land will be developed. But not everyone. Jim Ash, a homeowner who has property near the proposed development site

was quoted in a San Jose Mercury News article last March, as saying he doesn't think development of the property is inevitable. "It is only inevitable if we let it happen. It will happen until we get enough backbone to stop it from happening."

It's easy to see why homeowners living near the property are opposed to its development. But the voices that aren't often heard are those of us living near enough to the property to see it, and enjoy it often but with nothing to gain or to lose financially if the property is developed. For us, the cry for open space can only be termed an emotional issue. But that, I think, is important unto itself. The beauty of a community's surroundings have a lot to do with the quality of life it offers.

More than ever, the Marchese cherry orchard has come to symbolize the lay of the land, the look of our community, and the sense of character that makes it unique. It is, in a sense the personality of the past. The Marchese family cannot be, and should not be prevented from selling their land. But perhaps the city should buy it to preserve the sense of history it represents.

The City of Santa Clara's Draft of Environmental Impact Report (1991) of the Marchese Development Project describes the orchard's environment in poignant terms, naming "grassland species that consist predominantly of introduced annual grasses such as wild oats, soft chess, ripgut brome, bermuda grass, and barley." The report also

mentions miner's lettuce, filaree, common chickweed, dandelion, wild geranium, mustard, and wild radish that grows on the property.

Another passage describes the presence of birds. It reads like a chapter out of the National Geographic Society's "Field Guide to the Birds of North America". "The cherry trees provide food, cover, and nesting habitat for a variety of avian species. The flowering cherry trees provide food for an abundance of insects, which in turn attract species such as the American kestrel and black phoebe, that forage primarily on insects. A flock of band-tailed pigeons and a single sharp-shinned hawk were observed roosting in the cherry trees. Numerous yellow-rumped warblers and bushtits were observed gleaning the cherry tree branches for insects. Many of the older cherry trees and walnut trees may provide nesting for woodpeckers. Northern flickers were commonly observed foraging on the ground, most likely for ants. Although no redbreasted sapsuckers were seen during the field survey, many of the orchard trees contained evenly spaced rows of holes, which is indicative of their presence. Numerous seed eating birds such as the brown towhee, white crowned sparrow, mourning doves, and house finches were observed feeding on the ground. Fruit and berry eating species such as the northern mockingbird and American robin were a common occurrence...In addition, mourning doves, Anna's flycatchers, and ruby-crowned kinglets were seen."

So it is not only the cherry trees we would be losing, but the habitat of numerous species of birds and insects as well. The draft proposal

describes the impact that grading and clearing of the land will have on small mammals that make their home on the property. "The cherry trees will be eliminated," it states succinctly. And it goes on to say that site clearing will destroy a variety of small mammals such as reptiles, amphibians, rodents, squirrels, and hares. Those which do not move far enough, or burrow into the ground will be buried beneath concrete.

An archaeological survey of the property turned up some fragments of shell. The discovery of some fragments of abalone, turban snail, mussel and clam shells, led the archaeologists studying the property to surmise that a Native American burial site may exist in the area. The draft proposal recommends that an archaeologist inspect the site for important cultural remains after the land is cleared, and that if human remains are found, an archaeologist and Native American Group certified by the State Native American Heritage Commission should survey and monitor the site to evaluate the likelihood of its being a burial site. If it is they are recommended to assure that the human remains are removed and treated respectfully.

But if there are indications that this is a Native American burial site, how much better to leave it intact, to preserve this site for the sake of those who lived and died there, and for generations to come.

I wonder what this city's original developers would have thought about the changes wrought within this century. The book *Progressive Santa Clara*, published in 1904, seems to indicate their desire to see

the city grow and prosper. The book appears to have been written, in fact as a lure to prospective home seekers to move westward and settle this yet undeveloped paradise. "The awakening interest of the outside world in our incomparable state and the fruitful effort of the great transcontinental lines to turn tourists' attention westward and win from him the inclination to spend his time and money in European countries has had a stimulating effect upon the state in general, and has awakened in many sections which have from various causes long lain undeveloped, a desire to enter the race for industrial supremacy and ferret out whatever of latent resources there lies in such regions." Long winded, though it may be, that statement taken from The Progressive Santa Clara seems a pretty clear indicator that development and the growth of commerce was not far from earlier residents minds.

Yet as the book goes on to extoll the virtues of the valley and what made it so ripe for development, invariably it describes the area's unique agricultural appeal. "The story of the climate is written in blossoms and flowers rather than figures, and one rises to enthusiasm as he tells of winter gardens and luxuriant fields and forests in bloom every month in the year. Winter is but a name."

Ironically the very richness of the land and the climate, the things that made it made it most appealing for those moving west, are the very elements that led to its burial beneath the apartment complexes, homes, offices and concrete of today. Times have changed since the authors of the Progressive Santa Clara souvenir were

moved to say that the glory of Santa Clara Valley is in her deciduous fruit orchards. Today it is the destruction of those orchards that adds to our sense of growth.

According to Jeff Rodriguez, of the Soil Conservation Service located in Gilroy, some of the richest soil in the world is underneath the San Jose area. Still, even given the high fertility of the land, he says there came a time when the farmers and fruit growers in the Santa Clara Valley could not really compete with the growers in the Central Valley. The climate in the central valley was such that the growing season was longer enabling them to produce an even better crop.

Will the land lose its fertility when it is completely developed over? Lloyd Replogle, an engineer for the Soil Conservation Service says the chemicals in the soil that are so important to plants such as nitrates, phosphates and potassium will still be there, but the oxygen won't. Plowing the soil however, and re-establishing its mix with oxygen could restore the fertile value of the land. But how likely is it to be, one day, undeveloped?

Times have changed since there were some four and one-half million fruit trees in the Santa Clara valley. Times have changed since Bayard Taylor, historian and traveler looked out over the Santa Clara Valley from his view in the western foothills and wrote, "I can visualize in the not too distant future a city of small farms." He referred to the Santa Clara Valley as one of the three most beautiful valleys in the world. Sitting in the western foothills in 1991, and

looking out over the same location, one can now visualize a sprawl of urban development.

Now that Santa Clara stands on the verge of developing the last substantial, open space in the city, the responsibility to our future belongs to those of us who have made this city our home. We must decide whether it is worth saving a parcel of land that represents a continuum of time, that once lost cannot be regained. We must weigh the value of our sense of history, beauty, and the sense of peace which can be gained from preserving this open space against the weighty price of progress.

If the city of Santa Clara were to buy this cherry orchard, and value it as a gentle reminder of where we have come from and where we are heading, I believe we would be keeping with the original vision of those who came before us.

In 1957, Bertha Davison Rice wrote, in her book "The Builders of Our Valley", "May we, the people of the Santa Clara Valley, both its builders and those of us who are now enjoying the fruits of their building, long cherish her leadership, and may we try to carry on in the tradition which she has established in preserving the best of the past and looking ever forward to the future." I think she has a point.

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The Marchese family was not available for conversation or interview