

THE ALAMEDA

One hundred seventy-nine years of history

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INTRODUCTION

Today the Alameda is one of many stop-light-lined roads linking San Jose and Santa Clara, but there are 179 years of history buried beneath its pavement.

The Alameda, established in 1799, has seen every mode of travel from the wooden carreta to the modern day auto. Though the street is dominated by apartment houses and modern office buildings today, each generation has left its mark on the historical thoroughfare.

In the following pages, I will trace a few of these marks on the busy street so many San Joseans, including myself, take for granted.

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EARLY HISTORY

The Alameda dates back to 1799. Father Magin Catala built the road for wayfarers between Mission Santa Clara and the pueblo of San Jose. Under his leadership, 200 Indians cleared the land and planted three rows of willows trees with a road on each side and one row in the middle.

The willows grew tall and provided shade. In time, the Alameda is said to have ranked with the famous boulevards of the world. It became a natural stage coach route.

The trees, though beautiful, also caused problems, however. In the winter, the Alameda was rutted and almost impassable because the sun couldn't get through the trees to dry the road out after it rained.

Pen Pictures from the Garden of the World, published in 1888, described the situation as follows:

While during the summer months, the Alameda was a most charming drive, for four or five months in the year, it was almost impassable for vehicles. Travelers passing between the town of Santa Clara and San Jose were compelled to seek the side of the road and often to make a circuit of four or five miles. After dark, it was not unusual for people to lose their way and be compelled to pass the night in the open air.

In 1862, in an effort to solve the road's winter problems, Hiram Shartzler of the "Alameda Turnpike Company" was granted a franchise for the improvement and maintenance of the Alameda. In exchange for their efforts, the company was allowed to collect a toll from those using the road. A toll gate was set up and prices were set at 10 cents for buggies, 25 cents for teams and a dollar a day for stagecoaches.

Shartzter's company found it impossible to keep the road in good condition because of the ^{rain and} stubborn adobe soil, and there were many complaints from people who used the Alameda.

Finally in 1868, the county purchased the Alameda Turnpike Company's franchise for \$17,737.50 and declared the road free.

That year the San Jose and Santa Clara Railroad Company started the first horsecar run in San Jose on the Alameda. The popular horsecar line, owned by Samuel Bishop, ran from First Street in San Jose to the city of Santa Clara. It only cost a nickel to ride, and the horsecars were said to be more reliable than the old stagecoaches.

In 1868, the only houses along the Alameda were owned by Judge A.L. Rhodes, J.R. Johnson, Judge C.P. Hester, John Morse and a "man named Appleton," according to the History of San Jose, California by G.H. McMurry. In years to come, dozens of mansions were built on the Alameda, along with numerous businesses.

Gottfried Frederck Praxenberg, a German tavernkeeper, established a brewery at the Alameda and Cinnabar in 1869. It soon became a local landmark. The brewery was described at the time as the most extensive and complete brewery in the county, if not the state. It boasted two artesian wells and used barley and malt grown in Santa Clara County.

The brewery was hit by a fire in 1902. Its big towers toppled across Cinnabar Street and the malt house collapsed. The brewery was rebuilt; however and was strong enough to stand through the 1906 earthquake.

Prohibition closed the brewery in the 1930's. After repeal, it opened again as Wieland's Beer. In 1952, Falstaff acquired the brewery. It was one of seven Falstaff breweries across the country until it was torn down several years ago.

The canning industry in San Jose also got its start on the Alameda. Del Monte canning company began in 1817 on a cookstove in a woodshed behind the home of Dr. James M. Dawson.

In the 1870's following a dispute over the amount of land actually belonging to the Alameda, an act of Congress was passed, granting to the county a right of way to the road, 115 feet wide, and defining its location. Accurate surveys were made and granite monuments were erected so that the exact lines should always be preserved.

Over the years, there were many who wanted to remove the middle row of trees. After all, many were dead and others were in advanced stages of decay. There were still problems in the winter, but many residents saw the gnarled old willows as a link with the past and refused to let the trees be taken out until the 1880's when the first electric streetcar line was established on the Alameda. The trees were removed, and the tracks were laid down the center of the road.

Service began on May 20, 1880, but there were many problems as first. As G.H. McMurry wrote in the History of San Jose, California, the streetcars were plagued with broken insulators, short circuits from muddy streets and mischievous boys and curious adults who stuck their

umbrellas and other things into the rails to see the sparks. Due to frequent breakdowns, many patrons were left stranded on foot. Still the Alameda was on its way to becoming a modern thoroughfare.

TWENTIETH CENTURY

In the first half of this century, the Alameda remained a star attraction in the Santa Clara Valley. Grand estates lined the road from the mission to the brewery. At Christmas time, it was the site for the best lighting displays in town. All year round, the rich ~~w~~ could be seen parading down the Alameda in their glamorous clothes and fancy cars.

Those growing up in the '20's and '30's as my parents did remember the Alameda as the center of much of their lives. They attended the old Hester School, which was recently replaced with a modern building. According to Mrs. Irene Gairaux, whose family's real estate business is still flourishing across the street, the wr^eckers had a hard time destroying the old school, despite the fact that it did not meet earthquake safety standards. She is sure the new school isn't half as strong.

Many of the students at Hester crossed the busy Alameda via an underground passageway reached by stairs on both sides of the street.

People growing up near the Alameda in those pre-World War II days skated in the Roll-Ameda, spent Saturday nights at the Towne Theatre where they could see two movies, a cartoon and a newsreel for less than a dollar and win prizes

in one of the theatre's many give-away programs and banked at the Bank of America.

Today the old Bank of America is L. Louis Gairaux's Real Estate office. The bank, built in 1924, stands out as a landmark from the past. Leo Gairaux explains that the old banks were built to look substantial as if to show they were solid when it came to handling money, too. Although his real estate business has occupied the building since 1951, little has been changed. The marble counter still runs the length of the building, with impressions evident where the teller's cages used to be. There are still green and rose stuccoed flowers on the ceiling and the old-fashioned high windows. The Gairauxs have installed modern computers and other office equipment, but they plan to keep the building as close to the way it was originally as possible.

In 1928, one writer in the San Jose Mercury Herald remembered the Alameda as "the avenue down which richly clad caballeros pranced on silver decked horses in the days of the dons, whose famous three rows of trees cast grateful shade over fine ladies in phaetons and surreys drawn by high-stepping bays in the pre-motor age."

By the 1920's, however, the Alameda had become a dangerously busy thoroughfare with automobiles competing with the streetcars for dominance. A number of people were killed over the years in the conflict. One resident proclaimed, "You take your life in your hands when you wait for a car on the Alameda."

There was a move to change the road's name to Alameda West and Alameda South, but it met with little success. The Alameda had been the Alameda for too long.

In the late 1930's, the streetcar tracks were removed and the road was paved. Under a \$30,000 WPA project, new lights were put up along the road. There was talk of constructing a tree-lined center divider, but the state highway officials who had control of the Alameda at that time, said no to that idea.

Since then, the Alameda has gradually been modernized over the years. There are more than a dozen stoplights, new streetlights designed to save energy and more traffic than ever.

LANDMARKS

Today a drive down the Alameda brings visions of the old and the new together. New businesses, including several auto body shops, gas stations, Lord John's restaurant, Safeway, a billiard shop, a scuba supply, a nursery, have been there for a comparatively short while. Neto's Sausage Factory is one of the older businesses. For three generations now, the family has been turning out linguica, chorizo and other sausages.

The Importer, 2600 the Alameda, was originally the old Pacific Manufacturing Company. Bob Ware, owner of the Importer, which sells goods from all over the world, worked at the mill in 1939-40. In those days, he said, high school graduates either went to college or went to work at the P M Mill.

Most of the mansions on the Alameda have either been torn down and replaced by modern structures or converted into office buildings. The Singleterry Mansion is one of the latter. Located near the Alameda and Singleterry Street, the old house has been preserved fairly close to the original. The crystal chandelier still hangs in the entryway. Stairs lead up to a large hall, flanked by many doors. The furnishings bring back memories of the days when the mansion was the scene for top-class living. The orchards behind it, which provided income, are long gone.

Many of the old landmarks are gone. Tiny's Drive-In is one example. It was one of the first restaurants to serve food outside. My father recalls, "Everybody stopped there. If you went out, that was it." There was also Kelly's bar, a Portuguese Lodge, a race track, a department of motor vehicles office and many others.

Among the old-timers still remaining are Greenlee's Bakery, the broadgage railraod station that became Southern Pacific, and Westminister Presbyterian Church, built in 1926.

Heading down the Alameda toward the railroad bridge where it turns into Santa Clara Street, there are more modern landmarks: Arthur Murray's dance studio, Babe's Muffler Shop with the huge Paul Bunyonesque statue, Andy's Pet Shop, where several generations have gone to ogle the puppies in the window, Goushas, Highway 17 and the YMCA.

SANTA CLARA MISSION AND UNIVERSITY

There wouldn't have been an Alameda without Mission Santa Clara. This was the eighth link of the mission chain. The mission was located at several different sites before the present location was selected in 1825. It soon became the residence of more than 1000 people as well as a frequent stop for travelers between Monterey and San Francisco.

Under the Spanish missionaries' guidance, more than 1400 Indians cared for large herds of sheep and cattle and abundant crops of wheat, corn and beans.

By the 1830's, Mexico had won independence from Spain and the mission buildings and Indian lands and property fell into the hands of the Mexican government.

In the 1840's, the Americans came, bringing with them their way of life. California became a state in 1850. The following year, the first institution of higher learning in the state, the University of Santa Clara, was established by Father John Nobili on the grounds of the old mission. Nobili started with four professors, three priests and 26 students.

The mission and university withstood the 1906 earthquake well, although there was heavy damage all around. In 1926, however, a fire destroyed the mission and a number of other buildings at the university. Students rescued many of the mission artifacts from the flames and saved the bell given to the mission by the king of Spain.

By 1928, the mission was rebuilt. The new mission was larger, but copied very closely the original mission in

both outward appearance and interior decoration. The old bell was placed in the tower along with a newer one sent by King Alfonso of Spain in 1928.

Today the university has more than 3000 students and takes up nearly two blocks of the Alameda. The mission, with its vine-lined grounds, looks much the same as it did 200 years ago. The garden started by the Spanish missionaries still thrives in the midst of the mission and university complex.

THE PENA ADOBE

Not far from the university, the Pena Adobe sits back shyly from the road, its adobe walls a startling contrast with the restaurants and auto shops surrounding it. The adobe is the last surviving building of the third mission compound. It was one of many "apartments" for young married Indian couples, built of mud bricks and roofed with tiles.

The building was acquired by Don Jose Pena, one of the most ambitious and wealthy grantees during the Mexican period. He owned four such apartments, along with the surrounding land. After his death, his widow sold all but the adobe that is there today. One of Pena's descendents, Thomas Brother, owned the adobe house in 1906. He liked to tell how he stood in the doorway and watched the other buildings crumble while the little adobe stood strong. Thomas took care of the house until 1911 when he died at the age of 92.

The Santa Clara Women's Club purchased the adobe and opened their headquarters there in 1914. They added a wooden floor and repaired the tile roof. Since then, a carved wooden door and Spanish tile floor have been added, along with a large recreation room, but the old adobe walls are the same, cracks and all.

The Pena Adobe is thought to be the oldest house in the county. It is certainly the oldest on the Alameda. Not far away a new Good Earth Restaurant is being built. The Alameda continues to be a blend of the old and the new.

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