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RAMBLINGS OF THE LIVE OAK CREAMERY

by

Betty Jane Sachara
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SUBJECT: Historical essay for California Pioneers 1983 contest
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Preface

The following essay entitled "Ramblings of the Live Oak Creamery" is a fanciful composition which precludes a table of contents. It weaves the historical background of one of the federal historic sites in the town of Gilroy, California by explaining the development of the place from its inception. The writer attempts to shade in the lives of the people who have labored in the environment of this building from 1908 to 1983 from the odiferous days of butter and cheese making to the present time when the scent of fresh sawdust within the walls indicates that the spinning wheel maker has been at work.

CALIFORNIA PIONEERS OF SANTA CLARA COUNTY
HISTORICAL ESSAY CONTEST..1983
OPEN DIV. (GENERAL PUBLIC)
THIRD AWARD \$25..BETTY JANE SACHARA, GILROY

Ramblings of the Live Oak Creamery

If a building could talk, would people listen? They seem to accept the thoughts of the brick schoolhouse in the Schulz comic strip, PEANUTS, so why not mine? My voice might quaver with the mark of age as I've grown loose in the joints over the passage of years next to the Southern Pacific Railroad track where the heavy-laden trains run with the regularity of clock-work. Their rumbling just yards from my base makes the earth tremble. Slowly, ever slowly, my bricks are loosening as the ancient grouting powders away in the wind and the rain. In fact, my leaking roof over the many years' time has allowed my great beams to suffer end rot. Through a hole in the roof caused by a fire, the waters flow, creating a perfect set-up for summer termites that are at work in the softwoods. I might add that gold-spotted salamanders live in the sewers, coming out in the still of night to ramble over an old log used as a door stopper. Nimble-footed children in recent time have scaled my aging walls and have crawled through the roof aperture to explore my interior, leaving their names on the wall as evidence of their entry. Vandals have pegged rocks at my windows till most of the glass has disappeared except where the panes are boarded over by the current owners or where they have been protected by ancient screens. Despite my disreputable appearance I have reason to speak out with a trace of pride, because one of my owners has managed to get me the status of Federal Historic Site on March 11, 1982.

I have maintained a strong appearance being of solid brick construction in my original two large sections under the parapet roof which I heard a young architect recently tell is a design of buildings as constructed in the United States east of the Mississippi at the turn of the century. I came into being in

the spring of 1908---April to be exact---when Gilroy with a population of 2437 was but a hamlet at the end of the railroad line going south out of San Francisco. On a diagonal opposite me on my block I could look at the three-year-old architectural mix of a city hall that was built in 1905 and is now also a Federal Historic Site. My builder, Colonel Tracy Learnard, was a real businessman. He could appreciate how the many dairy farmers were in fierce competition as the town began to grow. It made sense to the Colonel to have all the dairies ship their cream to one central location so the townfolk could buy butter, cheese, ice cream, and eggs in the downtown area. Yup, that's what I was in my days of youth and glory---the Live Oak Creamery that produced the best butter and cheese west of the Mississippi River, they said. Big painted letters shouted my name on the north and west sides in order that everybody could read it without their glasses. On the Fourth of July the town fathers used to festoon me with flags indicating the fervor of their old patriotism when the band would march down main street in the dust of summertime. The level of the ground water table was so high that an artesian well used to overflow close by my location giving the creamery business a much-needed resource---the purest water in the world flowing down from the pristine peaks of the nearby mountain ranges. At my inception there were no paved streets and sidewalks as the old photographs indicate. One snapshot in the history books was sent to Germany to become a color post card for Gilroy back in 1911, according to its postage stamp---this being in George White's collection of memorabilia. Nevertheless, good old Gilroy was recognized as Dairy Capital of California---famous for its butter and cheese.

My original brick section could be entered off Martin Street via two doorways as the front large room was divided into the cold room and the office. Not another building in all Santa Clara Valley could boast of a cold room with walls a foot thick and an attic heaped with redwood sawdust insulation, all to create a cold room that would get no hotter than seventy degrees on a 100-degree day in summer. The second large room housed the butter churns, the cheese vats and forms, and, no doubt, the packaging facilities.

I am the building where the dairy industry of Gilroy was centralized as the No. 2 industry of South Santa Clara County where agriculture rated as No. 1. This was California's valley of heart's delight as some men called it, full of fragrant, blossoming French prune trees and Bing cherry and Queen Anne cherry trees. The fertile black lowlands grew the world's finest vegetable crops. And in the upper reaches on velvet hillsides the dairy cattle munched to their heart's content on lush green grasses.

When the Colonel decided to become the town's post master, he put management of the creamery into Mr. Garlock's hands. He kept the business in full swing employing the Luchessa brothers who had emigrated from Switzerland with their cheese-making expertise. They turned out 300 pounds of butter, 300 pounds of cheese, and 150 cases of eggs a day. Beyond my walls in other cities were three store outlets in San Jose and Oakland.

I believe my happy days were when the voices of the Colonel's children brightened the work atmosphere. He used to bring his two little girls and a son, Bob, on a trip to town to stock up his own pantry. Bobby was eight years old at my start. I'll-bet his eighty-three-year-old eyes would twinkle today to realize that someone has focused some historic light upon me in my old age since one of the present owners has sought to unearth my past for posterity. I heard her chatting with the historian from San Jose, Dr. Arthur Oglivie, the day he arrived with an official photographer who made formal portraits of me and my old refrigerator doors and my ancient doorlatches. Dr. Ogilvie told her to go for it, and she did, by golly!

My doors were closed for an interim as the family weighed their assets after the Colonel's demise. The butter business was sold to Ayers of San Francisco. Ayers decided my brick structure was too small for the big business that could be done in the cheese manufacturing end of it, so he initiated additions to my building. Came the day when they knocked a hole in my back wall to form a doorway into large room No. 3 that would house the three copper-lined cheese vats. In addition to the concrete floor with the central sewer, this room boasted of concrete walls half-way up to the ceiling for easy clean-up. On the roof was built

an eight-window cupola for circulation of air in the damp environment where the rubber-booted cheese makers used to slosh in the three-inch deep water so that the floor wouldn't get so sticky and hard to clean. Ayers made further changes in the front cold room by tearing out the wall that separated the cheese storage from the office chamber. He added a narrow wooden-floored office on the east side of the cold room which could be entered from the east by an exterior door as well as from two steps up out of the cold room from the interior allowing use of the lavatory. In addition, there was also built another narrow room along the east side of room No. 2 whose east door was now blocked when the laboratory took shape. This lab could only be entered up an outside stairway. On its east wall was a slide-up door above a steel ramp where the milk containers were admitted from the horse-drawn drays. Milk samples were immediately drawn for testing purposes according to state law, and the milk or cream went on to its destiny as cheese or butter. Back of the lab was the southeast corner store with its makeshift counter. It could be entered by a standard doorway as well as by a slide-up door to accommodate large shipments of produce. Beneath the lab was an underground cold room for retail products as the over-the-counter business thrived. This is the area that screams for reconstruction in 1983 as the leaking roof has destroyed the old wood.

Once enlarged how the cheese factory buzzed with the voices of the Luchessa brothers---sturdy hard workers who kept their noses to the grindstone eighteen hours a day if need be. Their little niece, Louise Berri, used to toddle around close to the cheese vats to the tune of Uncle Walter's voice warning, "Be careful, Louise! Don't go too close. You might fall in!"

In recent time back in 1980 shortly before her death, Louise made one last visit within my walls to renew memories. She groaned at the glass on the floor as evidence of vandals' work as city urchins continue to hurl rocks at the wrecked windowpanes of the cupola. She recalled seeing her uncles age with the press of labor and how she grew up into being part of the cheese business, earning a pittance of \$20 per week stacking cheeses in the cold room. She wondered how her uncles could survive the winter's damp cold in that dank vat room which boasted cheese production

of 1,300,000 pounds annually, one fifth the total cheese production in the state of California. For ten years the Luchessas kept the business in full swing. Next on the scene were the Zattola brothers with Ernest in production, Palmer as accountant employing Angelo Greco as head bookkeeper. The Zattolas kept the cheese-works in the forefront until 1939 when they moved their cheese manufacturing plant to Grants Pass, Oregon. Then a great silence enveloped me. An obsolescence seemed to set in with no permanent business of any significance in the past forty years. For a couple of years the cheese form room---where cheese used to be shaped and dated before going into the cold room---was turned into a laundromat. What a jangling of metal as the pipe fittings were introduced for a row of washing machines. The family in charge of the business moved into the vat room for makeshift living quarters. An exterior toilet perhaps accommodated such an arrangement. The corrugated iron-walled outer-chamber was shielded by a growth of locust trees. Recurring growth of perennials seems to indicate that flower beds might have graced my exterior once upon a time. In fact, out front on Martin Street narcissus grows each spring. Since the unused lavatory invited vagrants to sleep there and smoke, my present owners deleted this facility. They feared a carelessly dropped cigarette near my outer wood structure might lead to a needless fire.

For a year in 1949 the Jehovah Witness sect used the cold room for their temple until their permanent quarters were built in Morgan Hill. An electrical shop operator took over for a period of ten years using me mainly as a warehouse. The town's Christmas decorations slumbered beneath my roof for the greater part of the year. In the front office at the north east corner a certain Mr. Stewart worked out his deals as a load officer.

One dark night in February 1976 I heard the new voices of the present owners who told Gene Fachin, one of the town's big realtors, how they were being forced into new quarters and had to find a place to store their lumber. Fachin declared that I was the only building for sale at that precise moment in town in the Bicentennial Year of the United States. Without an inward look at my sad shape these folks purchased my decrepitude for their spinning wheel plant. It seems that the Sachara Spinning Wheel had gained

countrywide attention for its excellent performance in the production of fiber. In came their rare woods of red eucalyptus, orangewood, black walnut, teak, and rosewood from Brazil. They used also oak and maple for their remarkable castle wheels which I hear have gone as far away as Saudi Arabia and Australia. In came their lathes and saws and planer to create a new kind of music within my walls. Young Sachara, who makes the wheel parts at this time, has many brands in the fires of opportunity, so he actually spends little time in my environs. Prodding by mother put father and son onto my brick section of roof where they industriously took off the old roof, removed bowed timbers deep in wood rot for replacement, and laid on the tar and roofing. Then one day in summer after Dr. Ogilvie's visit with the photographer, a Volkswagen van pulled up in front on Martin Street for a look-me-over visit. They departed briefly only to return with Mrs. Sachara who had learned that this was the Historic American Building Survey team of young architects who hailed from Washington, D. C., the University of Princeton, and the University of Texas. They had decided to do architectural drawings of me which were to be placed eventually in the prestigious Library of Congress of the United States for all the world to realize that here in little old Gilroy I was once the greatest creamery in the West. The woman in charge of the Historic American Building Survey team seemed taken with the idea that this building that once produced so much cheese should now be seeing production of so historic a tool as a spinning wheel. I heard tell that in August 1980 when a farewell party was held for the Historic American Building Survey team at the close of their third working summer, Sybil Groff did, indeed, dwell upon the topic of the Live Oak Creamery's being the site of spinning wheel manufacture. She was fascinated with the tale of how a rocket engineer could turn his talents to the creation of what some call the finest engineered spinning wheel in America today. I tuned in on conversations that told how this man was a Lockheed rocket expert at work on small rockets for submarines to prevent their sinking. The Navy cancelled his work contract so at age 50 this expert engineer was caught in the aerospace slump of the early '70's. To keep sane during a year and a half of no work, he turned to the rare wood supply which

his son had gleaned from the falling citrus groves in Rialto, California. As a teen ager, young Sachara had followed bull dozer operators who were felling orange, grapefruit, and eucalyptus trees which he recognized for their lumber value. During the crucial period of time of no work, Eugene Sachara created miniature models of spinning wheels. Winning a red ribbon second award at the Los Angeles County Fair in 1970 for an authentic early American mini-model spinning wheel in black walnut, he was urged by a foremost spinner-weaver from Los Angeles to produce such wheels in full size, and she would sell them for him as she taught fiber arts in the Los Angeles colleges. Thus the Sachara Wheel began to roll, so to speak. Word-of-mouth sales put the Sachara Wheel into twelve states eventually, so it seemed a worthwhile venture to continue within my walls.

Betty Jane Sachara looked to my future as a federal historic site. I heard her tell Sybil Groff how the history of the town fascinated her as a newcomer on the scene in September 1974 when the rocket business employed her husband at United Technologies where he makes Space Shuttle rockets at the present time. She noted how an old timer, Sadie Frassetti, had gained a prize for creating Gilroy's town flag---an insignia now appearing on security forces' uniforms as well as on police car doors, and on town letterheads. The flag embodied a brick building, the railroad, and a heap of cheeses in the forefront---truly emphasizing me standing next to the railroad as the old cheese factory. Bells began to ring inside her head. When she further read about the Historic American Buildings Survey team's efforts in the valley, she called upon Dr. Ogilvie, who, in turn, got her ball rolling. He offered all the information that she needed to gain the goal of federal historic site. She buried herself in the tax archives at the Gilroy Museum. Likewise she looked into the historic archives of the Gilroy Advocate and the Gilroy Dispatch to learn about her old cheese factory. She conducted private interviews with cheese factory heirs and spent time in private correspondence with Colonel Larnard's heirs. Her nomination form had to be presented to the state historic commission for approval. Once approved, the State of California could then forward it to the Washington headquarters of the Historic American Buildings Survey director. State wheels

grind slowly, so she was informed that the nomination form was nearly lost in the shuffle between the Carter and Reagan administrations. With the aid of Sybil Groff who had promised to push the form forward at the Washington end, she at last achieved what she had aimed for.

In the distance on the diagonal from me the Old City Hall of 1905 is having its face lifted on the historic block between Martin and Sixth Streets. Because I am on the other side of the train tracks, I do not stand within the historic block demarcation. The powers-that-be might consider me too shabby a structure to be viewed historically, but they cannot take away what status was bestowed upon me last March 11, 1982---Federal Historic Site. My hope is that a work crew would show up on the horizon soon to repair my weakness, rebuild my brickwork, paint my glorious name in big letters on north and west sides once again so that the townfolk of Gilroy could once again appreciate the fact that an historic business---once the mainstay of the city---was housed within my walls.

And Betty Jane Sachara, a poet in good standing---has written the following poem in my honor:

Live Oak Creamery

I can show you a building that weeps in the rain.
It is old; it is fragile, and it knows the pain
Of rocks that have punctured its clear window lights,
Of rumbling trains on ten thousand nights
Which damaged its fabric and loosened its paint
On its timbers and bricks and its sashes so quaint.
What's the good of a building a century has seen?
Can it charm today's youth for what it has been?
Would the ghosts of the past relish life in its walls?
Will the industry heirs like the facts it recalls?
All its secrets lie buried in archival books
Where so few have the privilege to spare any looks.
Restoration may prove that the town can be proud
Of the antique brick building with which it's endowed.

Betty Jane Sachara
1983

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1. Gilroy Dispatch---issues dated January 19, 1968 and April 5, 1968 both of which refer to historic issues of the Gilroy Advocate of 1908.

2. Assessment roll books:

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" 965-38,	page 58,	" 243---	years 1907-08
" 965-39,	" 24,	" 249---	" 1908-09
" 965-47,	" 30,	" 267---	" 1917-18
" 966-4,	" 42,	" 504---	" 1936-37

Other Sources

1. Personal contact with heirs of the Live Oak Creamery
2. " " " a worker at " " "
3. " " " the Gilroy flag maker
4. " " " " San Jose historian and his photographer and with the Historic American Building Survey team of architects and leader who helped to achieve the status of Federal Historic Site on March 11, 1982 for the Live Oak Creamery.
5. Personal history of the present owners and of some town historians.