

An Immigrants Contribution
to
Santa Clara County

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Introduction

In the fall of 1977 my friend Louise Cate passed on some information about a class she was taking at MAEP from a German immigrant. Her high praise for this woman caught my attention as did the subject matter, 'Writing Articles for Publication.' Needing a break in the string of bottles, diapers, dinners and delivering mothering services to eight young children, a writing class had appeal as an outlet and as a stimulating diversion.

In the crowded class room at the Almaden Library animated friends were reuniting. As Mrs. Holyer stood and rang for silence everyone immediately sat down, opened their note book and took out their pen. Mrs. Holyer, eyes bright blue and sparkling, had a radiant, intelligent face. She commanded the attention of every student. She greeted us with a cheery and warm welcome. A hint of an accent enhanced her elegant manner and perfect grammar. I knew she cared about herself and others. Her welcome gave me, a newcomer, instant security. Her own confidence helped me as she said, "If you will do what I teach you in this class, you too can publish." I wondered why a successful author willingly chose to create her own competition in

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the writing market. Where had she been educated? Why did she share secrets gleaned after years of hard work and research to help other succeed and in a valley where competition won over co-operation.

She and I have learned and walked together for decades. I invite you to enjoy a walk with me through the highlights of her remarkable and influential life.

Erna Becomes a Citizen

Eager to become a citizen of the United States, Erna began as soon as possible to obtain her goal. In her autobiography she devotes an entire chapter to this experience. In conversations with her over the years she has often shared with me the importance of that step and what it has meant to her. Citizenship turned her heart into an American heart. She valued the fact that she belonged in every way to this valley and to America.

Born in Germany to Mathias and Anna Schretter on March 15, 1925, Erna was the daughter of prominent landowners. In 1760 her home, a stately three-story building on the main square of Weilheim, received an Imperial decree of great honor and importance. The title, *Keeper of the Posting House*, belonged to her father. Her family were hard working and prestigious landowners. Because they would not adhere to Hitler's regime they were forced to flee to a country town in Bavaria. Fortunately they owned a beautiful and historic home in the town of Elgfling in the Bavarian

Alps. However, this move caused the young Erna to wonder, 'who am I?' She writes,

"Life became tough. But there were bright spots: And much to the consternation of everybody, [I began] studying on my own, giving myself an education that would lay the corner stone to my future life."

Erna, had those same questions when she came to America. "Who am I?" She didn't wait long to find out. She sought education in the Department of Adult Education citizenship class. Her graduation certificate is dated December 7, 1961 and states that Erna Holyer has taken a course in American Citizenship-National, State, and local- in the Adult Education Department of the San Jose Public Schools. It is signed by H. Webb, Principal. Eight days later on December 15th the San Jose Mercury carried this news: "Erna Marie Holyer, Germany, of 2242 Cinderella Lane, [one of] thirty five aliens was likewise granted citizenship after passing tests propounded by Naturalization Examiner Hartford Z. Smith of San Francisco.

As a citizen she had achieved a goal many immigrants either neglected or failed to pursue to the end. Elated at her success, and filled with knowledge of her new country, her state, and her local community, she felt confident to

attempt greater vistas of learning in this land of
opportunity.

Adult Education, Immigrant's Road to Success

As a child, Erna loved to read. Her parents did not encourage her, telling her that too much reading would ruin her eyes. In Weilheim, the beautiful and prestigious home they live in served as a restaurant and hotel for guests. On the weekends Mathias turned the large ballroom into the town's first movie theater. The parents work never ended and Erna, who had less energy than her lively sister, felt pushed aside. She turned to study for companionship. When the family fled to the country there were no books to be borrowed so she sent away for classes in foreign language and had reading materials mailed to her.

Lacking the companionship of friends, she earned money feeding chickens and selling eggs to earn funds to buy a companion. Her companion, a sheep named 'Blackie', caused her family to laugh at her, but she knew her mind. Blackie happily listened as she

practiced her Italian, shared her poetry and reviewed new ideas.

Her drive for knowledge and learning had been established early in life. Arriving in Santa Clara Valley she joyfully found out that she could borrow books without charge at the public libraries. Her greatest discovery and the one that profoundly changed the course of her life was the door that opened to Adult Education.

It is difficult to imagine the thirst she had to learn. Her actions show us that she was not the casual observer of life in the valley. She immersed herself with determination and focus to absorb every opportunity. She didn't want to miss a moment. In one of her five volumes of personal memoirs she has typed a little note which is attached to her college transcript. It says:

"Since coming to America, I have spent some of my happiest hours in California Schools. In the wet winter of 1957 [*which is weeks after she arrived*] I enrolled in Sequoia High School and took oil painting under Richard Bowman, a genius whose fiery canvases still haunt my memory. After coming to Sunny San Jose [spring 1958] I weekly drove to Redwood City and completed the night course. In the fall of the same year, I discovered San Jose Adult Education. Courses in citizenship, art, languages, history and creative writing followed."

From her discovery of this new world of education, Erna pursued her goal to graduate. Her transcript from San

Jose Evening Junior College lists shorthand, piano, Spanish, English, Italian, Art, California History, U.S. History, political Science, home decorative arts, arithmetic and first aid. Her grades reflect a conscientious and reliable student. On June 3, 1964, Dr. Norman Waldorf, principal of San Jose Evening Junior College, presented her diploma granting the privileges of an Associate of Arts degree.

In 1969, after receiving her degree but still enrolled in classes, Erna wrote a 1,000 word essay on "Adult Education and the Foreign Born." Her inspiration for this article came from her own personal experiences and observations she made about others in similar circumstances. I am deeply moved when I read this essay and touched by her gratitude for the chance to learn. She writes:

"Adult Education renders a priceless service to country, community and individuals by teaching the foreign born."

Speaking from past wisdom she notes that limited vocabulary keeps a newcomer out of conversations, restricts job opportunities, and keeps him from making friends in other

cultures. As she continues you are aware of the personal benefits she received from Adult Education.

"The immigrant is a rootless transplant at first, desperately trying to get established. It is not until he identifies with the history of his new home land that he becomes settled and part of it. Every citizen, the community, and the country benefits. . .from the results obtained by Adult Education programs for the foreign born. Graduates of Adult Education staff important jobs and provide industry with specialized skills. Tending to be responsible persons, they make better citizens, workers and taxpayers. They vote and perform jury duty. They make better parents for their U.S. born children. Thanks to Adult Education, they no longer feel isolated, because somewhere along the way, while taking courses, they have made friends."

Erna did make many friends. Two of them made a solid impact on her career as an author. Clyde Arbuckle and Norma Youngberg blended for this young immigrant the what and how of her future writing. In a recent visit with Mrs. Holyer she emphatically exclaims that the influence of their classes on her work is 'TREMENDOUS!'"

Mr. Arbuckle's knowledge and love for the history of California and Santa Clara County was evident as he enthusiastically and colorfully taught his Adult Education classes. His stories whetted her appetite to delve into research about the glory and courage of this frontier she now called home. Stories of pioneers, immigrants as

herself, migrant laborers, the flora and fauna, the wide spread cultivation of the land as well as the hearty sea life all aroused her hunger to preserve this history in writing. In a recent conversation with Mrs. Holyer she told me,

"When I came here I felt totally uprooted. What was this place to me? Then I met Mr. Arbuckle and he told me about Germans who had already been here. It changed my attitude from neutral to pro! Suddenly I love it here. He was always very helpful. He is the foundation of my liking it here."

In an essay titled Clyde Arbuckle she writes,

"Arbuckle talked at length about New Almaden, describing tall smoke stacks, hidden mine shafts, an overgrown cemetery and the mine manager's house, Casa Grande. Since he made the place and its past sound exciting, I scribbled a note to myself to explore the New Almaden Mine Area for a book possibility."

On a class visit to see the Brand Book of Santa Clara County Mr. Arbuckle showed her the original branding irons and rawhide lassos used by early cattle ranchers. This intriguing piece of valley history became the subject of an article written by Mrs. Holyer and published by 'California Today'. Enthusiastic response from local readers brought it to the attention of three nationally known western publications; True West, Frontier Times and Old West. The article is preserved in the archives of the Library of

Congress in Washington D.C. The title, 'Badge of Courage,' is also translated into Braille, giving the document substantial and wide spread importance.

Norma Youngberg, the other great mentor, gave Erna sound direction. From Norma, her writing teacher, came the advice that led to a perfect blend of her love of the valley history and her writing skills. Under her insightful and caring tutelage, Erna improved her writing skills. Many obstacles faced her. She had limited skills using the English language. She had no typewriter to use for the weekly assignments. Though she found a dictionary at the Goodwill Store in San Jose, often she did not know how to spell the words she needed to look up. These challenges did not deter her.

Norma encouraged her to write for children who did not need sophisticated language or complicated sentences. She began a serious attempt to have her work accepted for publication. Her ingenuity led her to San Jose's main library where for 25 cents she rented a typewriter for 20 minutes which enabled her to complete assignments.

To her dismay, rejection after rejection arrived that first year. Not one to give up easily she continued her

research and observations of the valley and worked on her language skills. She thoughtfully handed in assignments and studiously attended her night classes.

On a January night one year after beginning her writing class her lack of success caused her to think,

"Would I ever see my stories in print? Perhaps I have no talent for writing."

Her doubts pressed on her mind. She recalled the decision she had made to be a writer when her sister Emmy died in 1943 and the harsh reality that there was nothing left that preserved Emmy's memory. She knew her written word had the power to preserve a legacy as did the music and art of the masters. "You are known through your work," she says. When you read a book, the author to the reader is alive.

To her delight, the next day's mail posted January, 1961, brought her first check for \$8.50. An author had been born. Her small success created a significant impact on her will to continue. The influence of her two great teachers had given her a solid basis to join the two disciplines together. Writing for children within an historical setting, a perfect combination.

An Author, A Teacher, A role Model
For Immigrants

Frank Freeman writer for the San Jose Mercury News had this to say of her first published book.

"Review & Herald Publishing Assn. of Wash., D.C., last fall [1965], brought out "Rescue at Sunrise," first book of children's stories by Erna (pen name Ernie) Holyer, a Cinderella Laner. Since which they've sold like the proverbial hotcakes, almost a first edition sellout..Now the same publishers have a fall release of "Steve's Night of Silence," [published 1966] a sequel anthology...So what else?"

After her second publication the San Jose Tribune named her 'Woman of the Week' and praised her for such early achievements. The article on March 16, 1966 declared;

"Since coming to this country, through Adult Education she has acquired American Citizenship, a High School diploma and an associate in arts...She has also mastered the English language so well that she has published over 60 articles in American Magazines. She had been earlier honored at an autograph party by Friends of the Santa Clara Library on the publication of her first book..."

A Cow for Hansel, published in 1967 dealt with a plucky 12-year-old boy who hired out to a farmer then learns his father's cows have been wiped out by hoof and mouth disease. He works against ominous odds to bring home a cow to his family to save their farm. His inspiring

success story reached the hearts of many local and international readers.

That same year, 1967, a surprise opportunity came to Mrs. Holyer. Into a busy schedule of writing and publishing she added two demanding writing classes. One taught by Duane Newcome in San Jose, the other held at San Mateo State College from internationally known Louise Boggess. A vacancy at Metropolitan Adult Education Program because of the retirement of the writing teacher, put her name at the top of the list to take over. Shocked, Erna went to friends and family for direction. The answers were the same;

"Everybody was against my teaching. Yet, wonderful teachers had bothered to teach me. Could I do less? After some deliberation, I drove to the school's administration and applied for the position my friend Mary was leaving."

Letters of recommendation were glowing in praise of her accomplishments and ability. Louise Boggess, her instructor at the College of San Mateo gave this reference;

"She would make an exceptional teacher. I have noticed in writing workshop sessions that she quickly analyzes the wrong technique used in a manuscript and offers constructive criticism in such a forceful but warm manner that no one is ever offended. She seems to reach out to the student, struggling to write, and in

a quiet sensitive way helps with the reconstruction of the story or article as the author himself wants to write it. She has that perceptive ability to look at the story through the author's eyes and desires.

This is a very rare quality and one that endears her to all her friends. On the other hand, she does not compliment unless such is truly earned.

I know of no person as qualified professionally or in personality to teach creative writing."

Erna accepted the offered job with the stipulation that she fulfill the requirement of becoming a credentialed teacher. She received her certificate and the words of Mrs. Boggess came true. Mrs. Holyer proved that the kind words were not just words, they accurately portrayed her mantra.

At the end of her classes she felt drained. The memory of learning from great teachers gave her the stamina to continue. During that busy year she completed At the Forest's Edge, published in 1969. That same summer a needed visit to the doctors brought stunning news.

Surgery was needed on her heart if she were to live. As a young woman in Germany, Erna had undergone a dangerous and life threatening surgery to scrape calcium from her heart. Because of the fragility of her health, the procedure was performed with only a local anesthetic. Two

others who had this surgery did not live. Dread filled her; the previous operation at age 22 had left her traumatized and awake during the entire procedure. She pled with God to let her stay alive, but wondered if she could make it through a general anesthetic. Thoughts of allowing other activities to get in the way of completing important writing projects filled her with remorse.

Little peace came. After a lengthy surgery of seven hours, she awoke to see the face of her husband Gene, and felt dazed, but glad to be alive.

Recovery from open heart surgery is lengthy. Cheery messages from friends helped and a one dollar contribution from an unknown child brought joy. Not wanting to put on hold her writing, Gene rigged up a lap table with space for a typewriter and supplies. Propped up in bed with dozens of pillows, she continued her goal of a book a year. In 1970 Song of Courage found excited readers pulling it from the bookseller's shelves. Aptly titled, the story of Elisha Brooks' pioneer travels from Michigan to California [the facts gathered in Mr. Arbuckle's classes] added tenderness to Erna's own courageous walk across another unknown plain.

After a year of being mostly recovered, her students were clamoring for her return to class. Her gratitude for past mentors led her back to class. She not only returned but finished another book, Lone Brown Gull, published in 1971.

In 1973, Frank Freeman, who had become a fan of Erna's, wrote in his column;

"Erna Holyer must be wearing her fingers down to knobs knocking out all that copy...What's the latest?...a story . . .about early Spanish gold adopted to eight grade classrooms. . .if all these are not enough to keep her busy, she has to walk three miles daily because of a heart condition which required surgery just a few years ago. . .since which time she has had three books published and a fourth contracted for, 35 articles in print. . .(including one in PHP , a magazine in Japan). . ."

In 1974 New Shoes for Daniel, a true story of a Chicano boy and the problems he and his family had to face came out in print and became an immediate success. The local Country Club Pharmacy, in Almaden, sold out of the allotted copies in one day. Her seventh book of the promised ten had a special appeal to Santa Clara Valley residents and particularly in Almaden. Her many walks in

Almaden and the stories related by Clyde Arbuckle had given her story substance and setting.

Herb Caen of the San Francisco Chronicle sent her this personal note, dated May 6, 1974.

"Thanks for letting me know about "Shoes for Daniel," and I hope I can help you sell a few copies. Your story is inspiring, even to a lackluster native like myself - I do admire what you have accomplished, and marvel."

Her eighth book, June of 1975, The Southern Sea Otter, published by Streck-Vaughn, is a tribute to her interest in the wildlife of California. This little book became widely read all over the Southwest. As part of a series which included separate books on the life and habits of buffalo, bighorn sheep, grizzly bears and other animals children were encouraged to protect and care for our natural resources. What an honor for a foreign born to be included with native authorities.

Sigi's Fire Helmet also came out in 1975, followed in 1982 by Reservoir Road Adventure. This book has the following notation on the back cover,

"This is a heartwarming story of Daniel and his family and their struggle to be self-supporting.

Readers are given unforgettable glimpses into the lifestyle and self-image of migrant farm workers.

Erna M. Holyer has written several stories about migrant farm workers in the Santa Clara Valley, California. She herself has spent time in the fields, working with the migrants. "One year I worked three weeks and earned \$16.85 for three weeks' hard labor".

An earthquake on October 17, 1989 gave Mrs. Holyer more than a shake up. A bad bump received during the quake turned into a malignant lump in her breast and by December of that year she found herself once again under the knife of a surgeon. The news of breast cancer and the following recuperative period were not what she had expected. At the urging of her husband she cancelled the 1989/90 fall and spring classes at MAEP. She devoted time to studying health reviews, walking and working on new books and articles. A sense of her is quickly seen as you read her thoughts of this trial.

"Despite my increasing tiredness, I was determined to finish Not on a Whiskey Barrel, the Elisha Brooks book I had planned before my cancer diagnosis. Between chapters, I wrote a contest story for the Writer's Digest, and an original article for Reader's Digest.

Writing gave me no time to think of myself. It was as if I stepped into somebody else's skin and forgot about myself completely. Writing was not new, but this cancer business was new. Every year, I had included

something new in my life, something I hadn't done before. It's what keeps you young and interested, I believe"

During the next 15 years in conjunction with her writing and teaching she became actively involved with the prestigious International Biographical Center. Her travels took her to San Francisco, Canada, Europe, Japan and Singapore. Knowing she had established herself as an expert writing teacher the congress invited her to speak. Her motivational talk titled, "You Can" illustrated the success of her students and the qualities needed to publish. From her notes she generated another book, Self Help for Writers; Winners Show You How.

The children's market slowed, but not Erna. She continued her research on Elisha Brooks, California pioneer. Her inquiries led her to family members who provided original documents and letter. Simultaneously she worked on a novel for young adult readers set in Nazi Germany. A request arrived from Tokyo asking permission to translate her published work into Japanese. Like artists whose work is displayed inter-nationally, her words 'hung' in the hearts of young readers around the world.

A handsome and well written trilogy, Wilderness Journey, Golden Journey and California Journey,

was published in 1997 by Preview & Harold Publishing Association. The true story of Elisha and Vienna Brooks will be a lasting treasure of information about the settlement of California. Erna obtained priceless family documents and letters that allowed her to look into the personal lives of these early pioneers. The cover of the book states,

"Erna Holyer is a freelance writer and creative writing instructor for the San Jose Metropolitan adult education program. While Erna was a student at San Jose evening college [again Mr. Arbuckle's influence] a term paper assignment led her to the Brooks family and their amazing true story."

By 2002 her classes and other teachers were using her writing manual, Self Help for Writers; Winner Show You How. Student success over the years showed they had been well taught. The joy she felt when her students published was paramount. Their success was her success. An MAEP flyer listed these impressive student accomplishments:

1. Earned a quarter of a million dollars for literary efforts .
2. Authored nonfiction books and romance novels.

3. Landed positions as editors, staff writers, columnists.
4. Won honors and prizes in literary contests.
5. Qualified for membership in professional writer's clubs.
6. Sold to national and local publications.
7. Made lasting friends, expanded consciousness, shared person insights, experience and information, and boosted their own self-worth.

In her efforts as a teacher and a writer Mrs. Holyer worked for and accomplished lasting success. Thank you does not amply express what her influence has been to those who have been touched by her sterling life.

Another year, and another book. This one a gripping book for young readers and for students of the Nazi era Written by author and eyewitness of the time, Erna Holyer. The publication of Dangerous Secrets in 2003 marked her 15th book. She was in her 75th year of life.
book. She was in her 75th year of life.

Her next project, begun two years earlier, came off the press in December of 2004 and stands as a testament to

a life of courage, valor, nobility and focus. Her legacy in Santa Clara Valley is found in her books and articles, but the legacy in the hearts of her students and friends is found in her life.

Erna Holyer, Her Legacy

The legacy of Mrs. Holyer is growing exponentially. As her students learn from her they publish. As they are published they are recognized as students of Mrs. Holyer. They identify themselves as residents of Santa Clara Valley. The impact of this great teacher and prolific author will last far beyond her life. It will survive for generations.

Who is part of this legacy? What have they done and what do they say about her? In an essay titled 'Observations on Erna Holyer and her Writing Class' student Bobbe Kurtz writes,

"They come to learn. They return year after year drawn by the magnetism of Erna Holyer. . . Alumni have become editors, columnists, authors of books and articles. Karl Laucher is News Editor of the Times Newspaper Group. Bob Chapman writes the Mail Bag gardner column of the 'San Jose Mercury News.' A rookie at writing when she enrolled, Cristy Shauck became editorial assistant and Calendar Editor for 'South Bay Accent', and she sold top stories to major national magazines. What is the magic power Holyer instills in her students . . . [they] say that magic potion lies deep

in Holyer's philosophy of living. It consists of two words, 'I can!'."

After attending a conference at Mills College she received this personal note in 1973,

"Dear Erna, I was so sorry not to get another chance to speak to you at Mills - - for of all the people I met there, you were the most inspiring. There was something very special about you, and your attitude towards life." Signed, John M. Allen, Senior Staff Editor, Reader's Digest.

Her thousands of students agree. Because we have walked with her, now we too, say proudly, "I Can."

The End

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