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The History of the Los Altos Area

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The Indians

The record of man living in the Los Altos area dates back ten thousand years, when a primitive tribe of Costanoan Indians called the Ohlones inhabited the area.¹ Their early territory consisted of the San Francisco peninsula; western Contra Costa, Alameda and Santa Clara Counties.² They lived off of acorns, berries and the animals that roamed the area, such as deer, bear and steelhead trout that were found in the local creeks.³ The Indians lived in peace, without any written laws. They practiced the traditional rites, and ceremonies. Legends and stories were passed through the generations, both by telling the stories and also singing them.⁴

In 1769, Spanish explorers came into the area to set up missions. In order to obtain more land, the Spanish started killing off the Indians. When the Spanish entered the area, they brought with them many foreign germs. The Indians contracted colds and other diseases. As a result of this, they slowly began to die off. Other Indians were taken slaves by the Spanish. The white men also poisoned, shot, and massacred the Indians.⁵

The following paragraph, told by an old Ohlone chief, states his feelings and those of his tribe.

The valleys, the hills, the rivers, and the trees belong to my people. They have always lived here; their fathers are buried here; before the white man came they were happy and content..

The white man has taken possession of our fields, has fenced our springs, has killed our game and cut down our acorn trees and now they wish to drive us from our homes. We will never go-We will die first.6.

In 48 years, their population decreased about 95,000 people until there were only 15,000 remaining. Once known as "The people of the West," today they are almost forgotten.7.

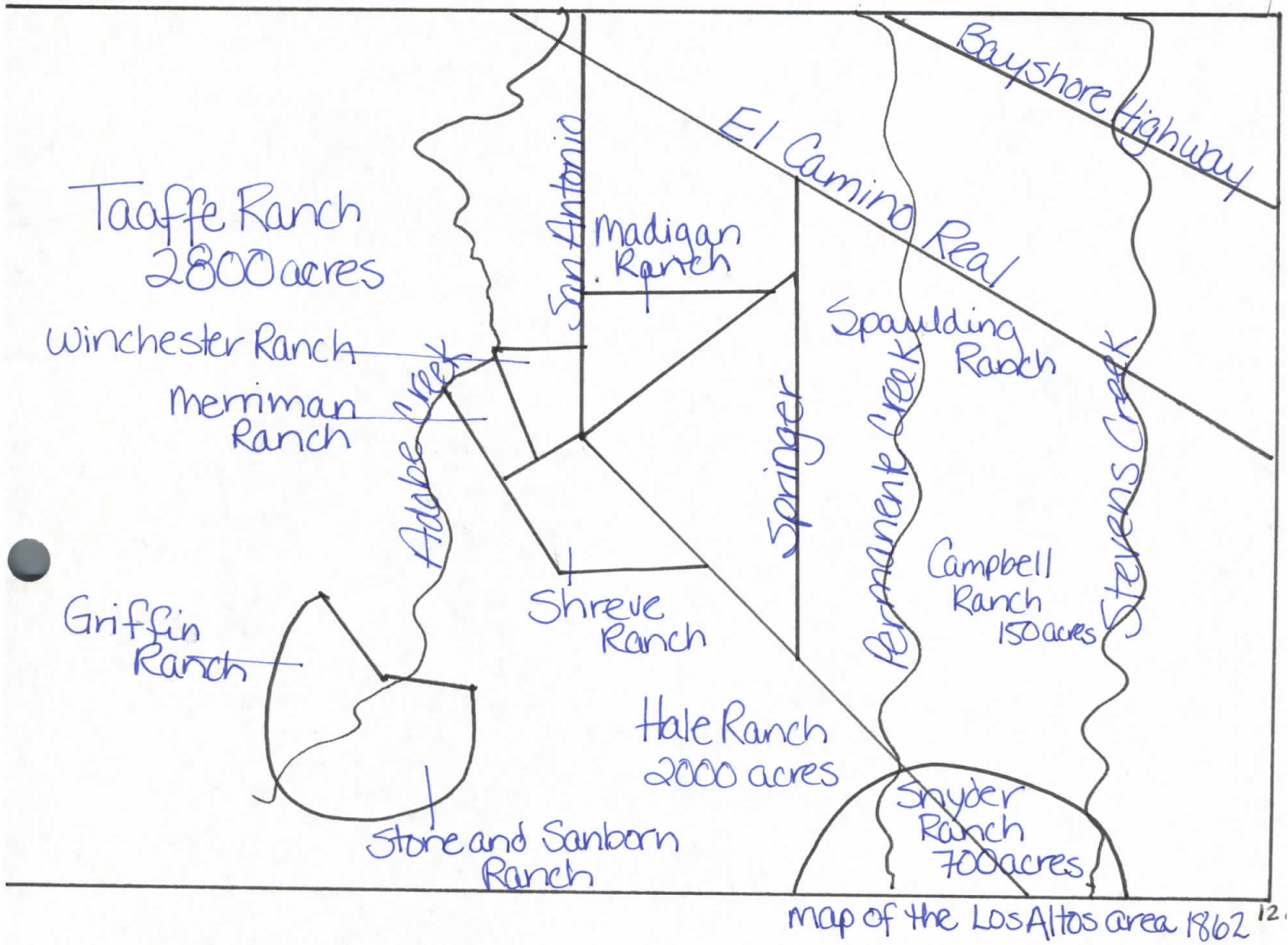
Early Explorers and Settlers

The first recorded explorer in the area was a man by the name of Don Gaspar de Portoa. In 1769 he rode through the Los Altos area in search of Monterey Bay. Portola considered the expedition a failure, because the bay was not found.⁸ Another noted explorer was Juan Bautista de Anza. In the year 1776 he was on an expedition to explore the San Francisco Bay. Anzas' party was the first to record any mention of the territory of the Los Altos area. Their travel log told of the areas' terrain and creeks.⁹

During the late 1700's and early 1800's California was still a province of Spain. Spain issued land grants in 1833 to encourage settlement in the area.¹⁰

The first two land grants in the Los Altos area are what is now known as Los Altos and Los Altos Hills. The first land grant (now Los Altos Hills) was granted on June 30, 1840, to two Indians, Jose Gregorio, and Jose Ramon. They had lived on the plot of land for many years prior to their land grant of 5,000 acres. On November 6, 1850, they sold their land to Doña Juana Briones de Miranda. She named her land Rancho La Purisima Concepcion. As she grew older, she split her land between her children, and also sold a large amount to outsiders. ¹¹.

In the late 1850's, a man named Joseph P. Hale purchased approximately 2,000 acres in the southern portion of Doña



Juana's original ranch. He named the ranch the Hale ranch. It extended from Adobe Creek on the west to Fremont Creek on the north; Permanente Creek was located on the east, and the hills bordered the south side. A short time later, 700 acres of the Hale ranch was purchased by the University of Santa Clara as a site for their school. The San Francisco Earthquake of 1906, and subsequent fire, reduced the funds of subscribers to the university, and the land was sold to others.¹³.

On March 24, 1839, a second land grant was issued to Don Juan Prado Mesa, by Governor Alvarado in Mexico City. The land was named Rancho San Antonio, which is now known as Los Altos. The area ran from Adobe Creek to Stevens Creek, and also divided in half by Permanente Creek. Prior to his death in 1845, Don Juan Built an adobe house for his seven children, and he willed his land to them.¹⁴.

In 1862, the character of the land drastically changed when a man by the name of John Snyder proved that his ranch located in the foothills along Permanente Creek could grow wheat and other grains without irrigation. The wheat crop soon became the main basis for the economy. After the crops had been threshed, loaded wagons could be often seen going to the shipping docks along the bay.¹⁵.

Early City Life

Prior to 1900, Mountain View was THE town. The cities of Los Altos and Sunnyvale weren't even being considered. The area was covered with grain crops and fruit trees. In the late 1880's, winemaking became the chief industry in Los Altos. Around 1906, Los Altos was being noticed, the population increased, and subdividers stepped in. Subdividers broke apart the big ranches.

The present townsite of Los Altos was acquired by Mrs. Winchester, (widow of the Winchester rifle manufacturer) in 1906. The Winchester ranch and adjoining Merriman ranch, became the outline for the area. Mrs. Merriman (sister of Mrs. Winchester), soon after the towns founding in 1907 converted her large two story house into a school named the Chandler school. The school for teen-age girls was privately owned. The school put a major emphasis on outdoor living. The class members raised their own vegetables, fruit and eggs. They got fresh cows milk, and from it they made butter.¹⁶

The Los Altos Land Company, which was formed by a town member named Paul Shoup and a group of his friends, laid out the formal townsite in 1907 after its purchase from Mrs. Winchester. The new district was advertised as "The loveliest place on the peninsula."¹⁷ People from San Francisco started migrating down the peninsula and settling in Los Altos. A railroad, which ran five times daily up to San Francisco and



Los Altos Garage 1912-The garage stood on 1st and State St.18.



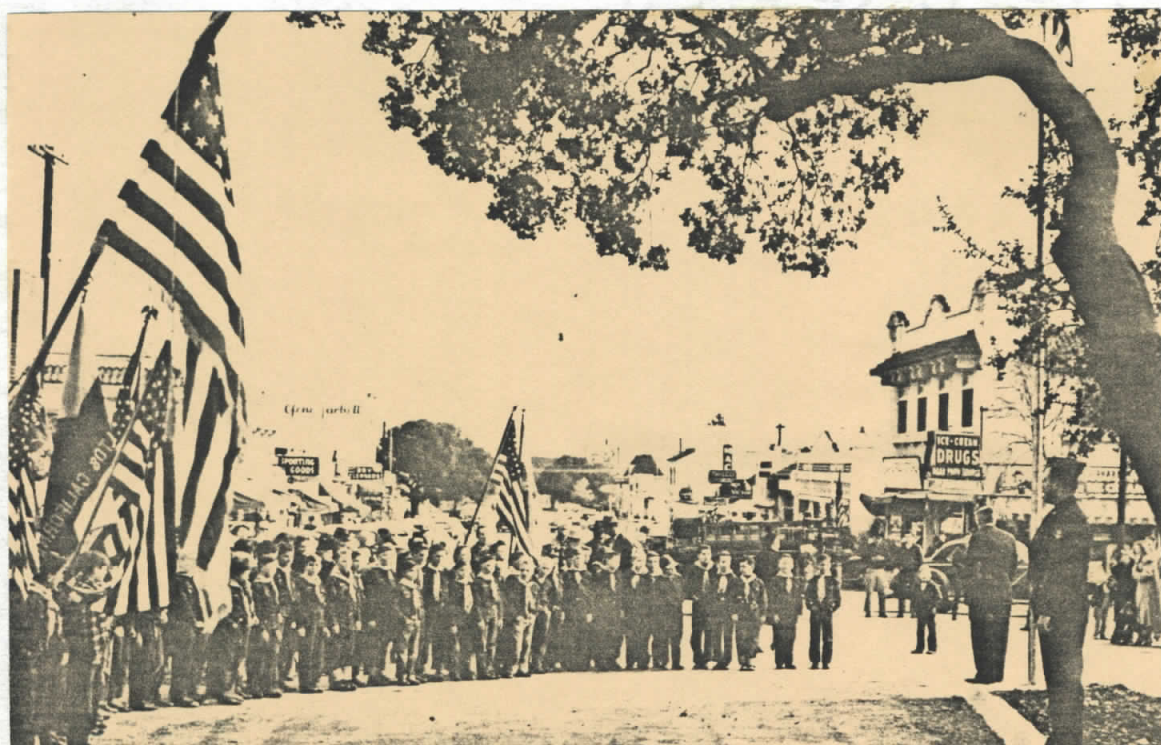
The first plumbing shop in Los Altos-Rathbun and Son-located on the East side of 1st St. Circa 1925-Standing in the doorway is F.L. Rathbun.19.

back, enabled the people to move to Los Altos and commute to the city for work costing only a nickel a time. In 1915, an electric rail was also installed for extra transportation to San Francisco. Los Altos started to take form.²⁰

On August 5, 1908, the first city newspaper was started. It was named the Los Altos Star. It lasted only a few issues before going out of business. Also toward the end of 1908, the first person in Los Altos acquired a telephone, which was connected to the main Mountain View terminal. By July 1, 1911, Los Altos had fifty houses, a school, hardware store, post office, grocery store, the Los Altos Land Company, a blacksmith, restaurant, carpenter store, livery stable, and an express business store. By 1915, the people of Los Altos got their first library. It was located in the office of the Los Altos Land Company, and contained approximately one hundred books. In 1911, when the deeds to the land were being sold, a regulation stated that no liquor could be sold in the town. If a person was caught selling liquor, their land sale would be void.²¹



Los Altos Garage-Located on the corner of State St. and 1st.^{22.}



Flag raising ceremony at the newly erected flag pole under the Main St. oak tree. 1949-present were Cub Scout packs 35, and pack 814.^{23.}

The life of Alexander Clay, a man who grew up in the area

Mr. Alexander Clay's parents came from Switzerland in 1898, and moved to San Francisco. Their name used to be Koll, but when they arrived in the States they were advised to change it, and thus it became Clay. In the early 1900's, the family decided to move to Mountain View (now southern Los Altos), where they established a ranch on what is now known as Newcastle Avenue. They owned many fruit trees, particularly cherries- including Bings, Royal Anns, and Tartarians. They also had apricot trees. In addition to the fruit crops, they also owned farm animals such as horses, chickens, goats, etc. They used the horses to help farm the ranch, and used the the other animals for food. Originally, the ranch consisted of 35 acres. In 1902, Alexander Clay was born. During his childhood, he lived with his parents, two brothers, and one sister. Every weekend, their father used to take the children hiking in the hills all day.

The 1906 earthquake didn't do any damage to the family ranch or house in particular, but caused much panic and chaos in the nearby cities. Mr. Clay said the scariest thing was when, during the earthquake, many people from Agnews State hospital escaped. "Many people could be seen running around in their jail-stripped outfits," he said.²⁴. As on all farms, rains and droughts affected the crops greatly, but the family always made it through the hard times. By saving money from

previous good years, they were able to scrape by. During the droughts, a water pump, located on Stevens Creek, used to help the situation. Fishing for trout in Stevens Creek was enjoyed by many kids after school.

Between 1910-1912, Los Altos saw its first car, which traveled on dirt and gravel roads. It was an exciting day for the Clay family when their first car, a 1917 Buick, was brought home.

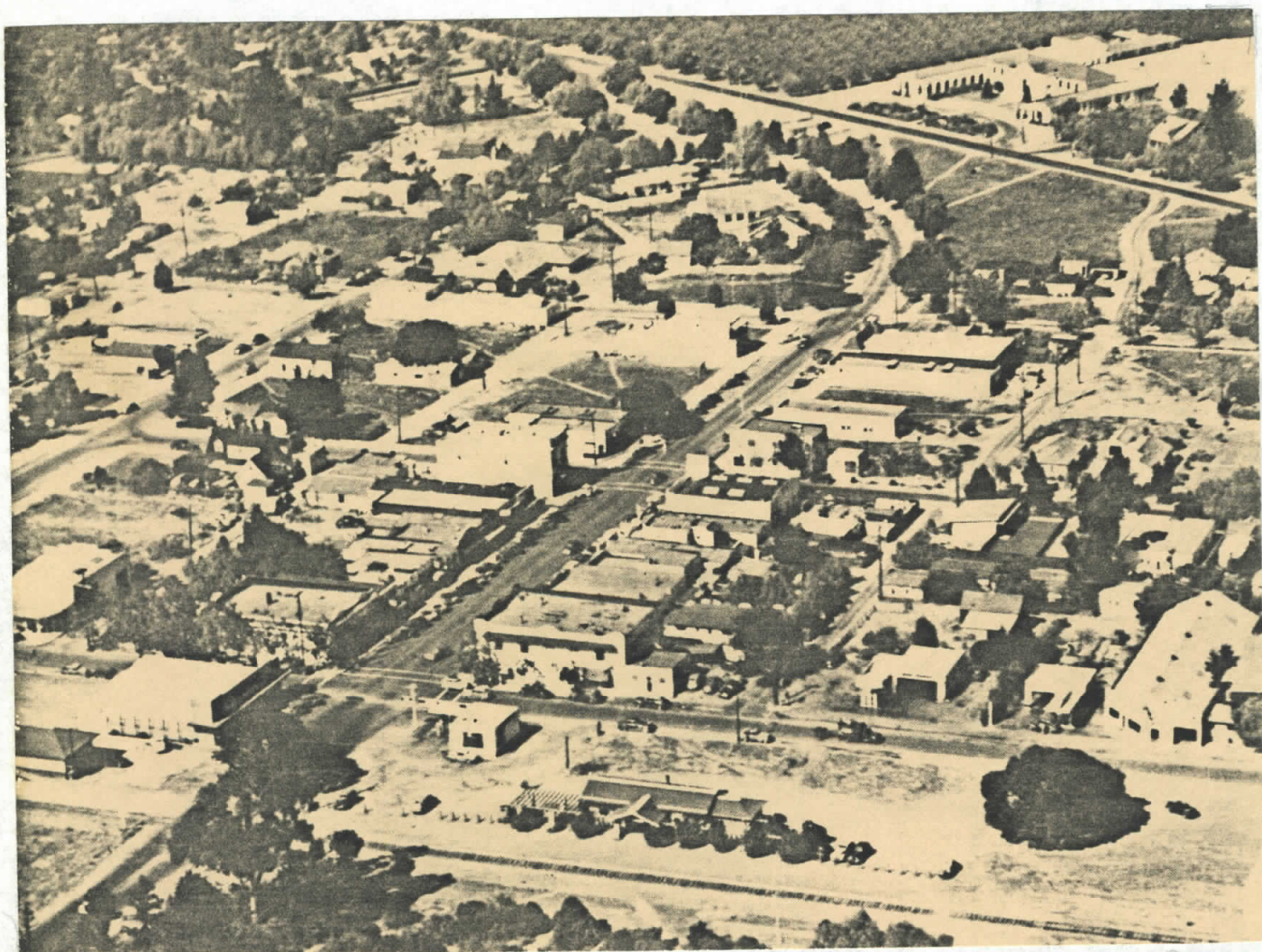
When Mr. Clay became a teenager, he attended the old Mountain View High school, to which he either walked or took a horse drawn cart. After high school, he attended Stanford University to study entomology (the study of insects). He decided to drop out of Stanford, and went back home to help on the family ranch. He helped pick the fruit, which was sent to local canneries, and also to the eastern market.

In 1935, Alexander Clay picked his bride, a young lady from San Jose. They got married and moved onto his family's family's property, where he built himself a new house. The house, which is still standing, is located on the corner of Clay Drive, and Candace Way. Clay Drive is named after himself, and Candace Way was named after his daughter Candy. The other street on the property is Alexander Way, which is Mr. Clay's first name. To the west of the Clay ranch was the Mc Comb ranch. On the other side was the Kircher ranch, from where Kircher Court gets its name.²⁵.

After World War II, people flocked to Los Altos by the thousands. In the 1940's, part of the Clay family ranch was sold to Mr. De Benedetti, and in 1968, the rest of the land

was sold to Mr. Joseph Eichler to be subdivided. The subdividers burned down his parents' old ranch house, which was his boyhood home, but they spared the one he had built himself.

Alexander Clay and his wife are now residing in Los Gatos.²⁶

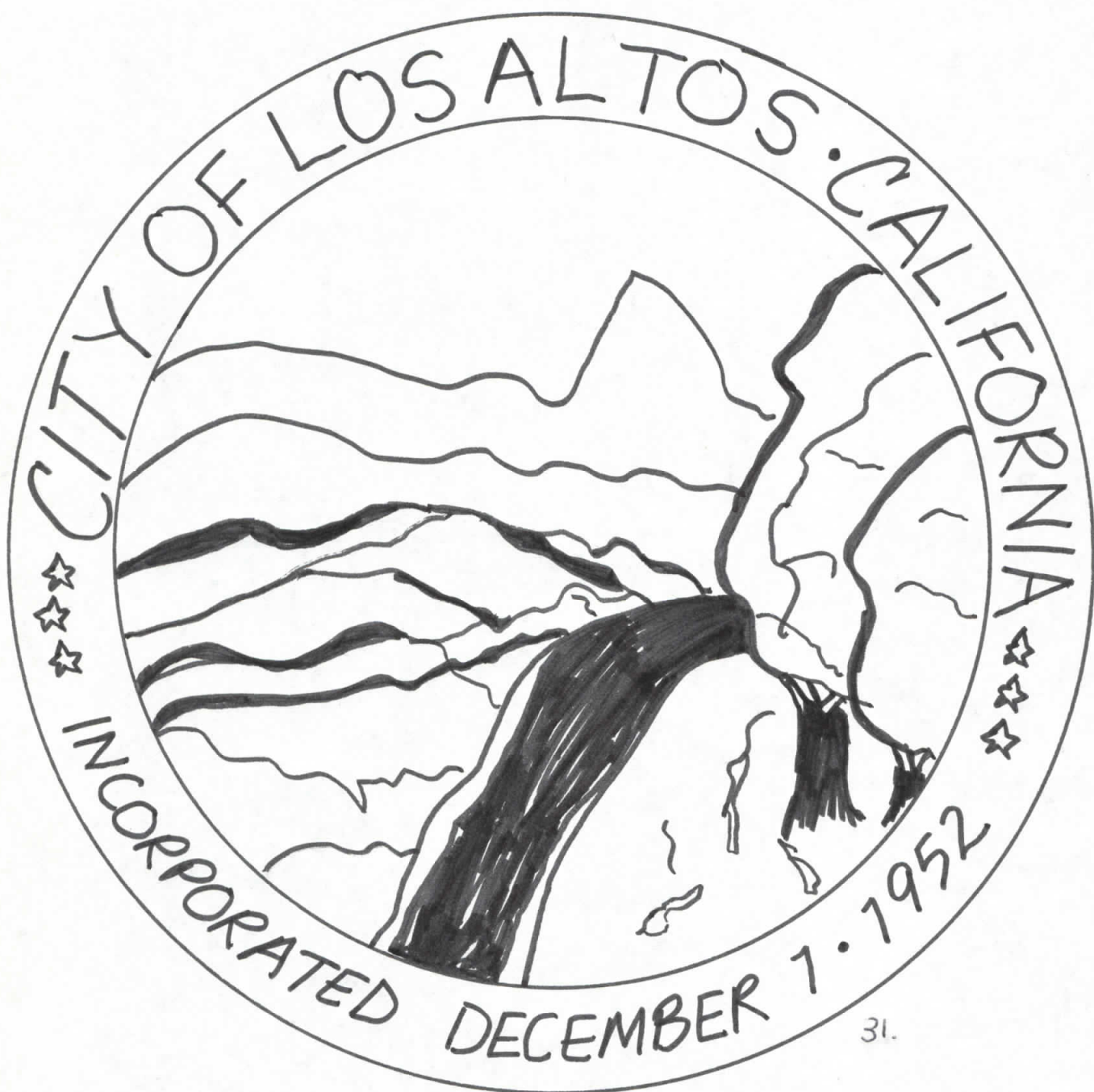


Aerial photo of downtown Los Altos business triangle. 1950. ²⁷

Incorporation

The city of Los Altos was created by a group of citizens, novices in municipal government works. They were people who were interested in keeping the single residential type of living. Los Altos was the first community in the post World War II era in the Santa Clara Valley to form a new city government. During this time, the city's population was approximately 15,000, inside a valley occupied by about 700,000 people (1951).²⁸.

The incorporation movement started in 1951, when rumors were running rampant in the Almond Avenue area. The rumors held that developers planned subdivisions in the orchards and open land between Almond Avenue and El Camino Real, and that these subdivisions would soon be annexed to the city of Mountain View.²⁹ Residents of the Los Altos area saw this as a threat to their area and to the value of their property. The cry rang out from a citizen, "We want to incorporate to keep from becoming a city."³⁰ A. Watson Conner was the leader of the incorporation movement. The election was held on November 19, 1952. The incorporation was favored by 2,138 voters and opposed by 1,906. It was a small margin for such a large issue. The people who opposed the incorporation were not pleased with the results, and, for some afterwards, the people of the area wondered if the city would be incorporated or not. A while later, a



31.

state decision made in court cleared up the legality of the incorporation. The men who were then elected to organize the city were A. Watson Conner, a retired insurance executive and engineer; Bert H. Riggs, a retired rancher; Clarence O. Witt, a retired mechanical engineer; Joseph W. Fortunato, an engineer; and George H. Estill, an airline manager.³²

Under state law, Santa Clara County officials supervised the change in the government from county to municipal form. On December 1, 1952, the Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors canvassed the election results and certified an order to the California Secretary of State, declaring the city of Los Altos incorporated. The above five people were named as councilmen in the new government. Los Altos thus became the eleventh city in the county to incorporate. The new city of Los Altos hired other people to get the city started. They were Joseph Salameda, building inspector; Roland Renshaw, police officer; John M.R. Hope, city clerk; Herbert Rose, city treasurer; and Gardner Bullis, city attorney.³³

The City of Los Altos Today

The name Los Altos came from a Spanish word meaning "the heights". Los Altos had been previously known as "the Crown of the Peninsula" and "the Banks and Braes". Both names which never caught on.³⁴ The city is often referred to as the City of Trees. Los Altos is located in the Santa Clara Valley, approximately forty miles south of San Francisco. It is situated 225 feet above sea level in an area of six square miles. However, Los Altos remains a semi-rural area. Los Altos is surrounded by four cities. They are Mountain View, Sunnyvale, Cupertino, and Palo Alto. There are requirements regarding minimum house lot size, which is 10,000 square feet. Industry is banned from the city, and there are only small stores and businesses within its boundaries.³⁵

The climate is mild, sunny and dry. The sun is seen about three hundred days per year. The average fall of rain is around sixteen inches per year. The rain falls primarily between October and May, with only a freak storm every now and then during the off months. The residents are from many different backgrounds. A 1975 census showed that there 23,276 Caucasians, 109 Chicanos,³⁵ Blacks, 350 Japanese, 246 Chinese, 52 Filipinos, 25 American Indians, and 1,636 people of other races. The total population in Los Altos is 25,862 people.³⁶

The present mayor of Los Altos today is Harry C.

Kallishian, and his council consists of the following four members: Robert S. C. Eng, Robert A. Grimm, Roy E. Lave Jr., and Jane Reed. Also located within city hall is the city staff and four commissions. The commissions are the Planning Commission, the Library Commission, Parks and Recreation and the Historical Commission.³⁷.

The first newspaper, The Los Altos Star, was followed by another paper using the same name. After a shortly longer circulation time than its namesake, it too died. In September, 1947 The Los Altos Town Crier started, and has since been in operation.³⁸.

The Future

The future outlook of the city is promising. If the laws that exist regulating industrialization and property size remain, then our community will be preserved. Programs such as recycling and emphasis on alternative power such as solar, help to keep the city of Los Altos healthy and responsive to ecological concerns.

Conclusion

Although Los Altos has changed a lot from its early recorded days to the present, the city maintains a rural character. Within its boundaries live a vital and vigorous population who work hard to unite and preserve the area. Today, Los Altos is considered a very enjoyable place to live with its many educational programs, fine shopping centers, recreational activities and pleasant parks. Los Altans are proud of their history and confident of a good future.

Footnotes

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2. Florence M. Fava, Los Altos Hills-The colorful story (Gilbert Richards Publications; Woodside, California. 1976) Pg. 1.

3. Goodrich, 11.

4. Fava, 2.

5. Goodrich, 11.

6. IBID, 11.

7. IBID, 11.

8. Fava, 8.

9. IBID, 8.

10. _____, History of the Los Altos Area, (Los Altos Chamber of Commerce) Pg. 1.

11. IBID, 1.

12. Los Altos Land Company, Los Altos, Los Altos file, Los Altos Library. Pg. 2.

13. _____, History of the Los Altos Area, Pg. 1.

14. IBID, 3.

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17. Joseph Salameda, A Collection of Historical Material (Palo Alto-Salinas Savings and Loan) Pg. 3.

18. Los Altos Town Crier-history file.

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21. IBID, 4.

22. Los Altos Town Crier-history file.

23. IBID.
24. Interview with Mr. Alexander Clay, March 24, 1981.
25. IBID.
26. IBID.
27. Los Altos Town Crier- history file.
28. Northern California Savings and Loan, A History of the Incorporation of the city of Los Altos. Pg. 2
29. IBID, 3.
30. IBID, 4.
31. Ralph F. George, Los Altos Informer, 1970, (Farwestern Publications)-cover,
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34. Los Altos Chamber of Commerce, Los Altos, California: Community of Trees, (Mills and Company) Pg. 3.
35. IBID.
36. Mark Johnson and Ed Pope, "County wide census, Santa Clara County," The Mercury News Answer book, San Jose Mercury (October 19, 1980).
37. Los Altos Chamber of Commerce, Annual Report 1979, Pg. 1.
38. _____, "Under the Oak" Los Altos Town Crier. (November 19, 1972) Pg. 3.

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