

The Remembered Our Valley,

BY

TOM MACH
III

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RAMBO

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Submitted by:

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Introduction

At 87, Ralph Rambo still remembers the Santa Clara Valley the way it was at the turn of the century. He remembers chasing frogs along Stevens Creek Boulevard and wearing clothes made from cotton sacks. He remembers the Valley being crossed with dirt trails instead of ribbons of concrete. But most of all he remembers the pioneers...not as the history books tell it but as he, his parents, and his grandparents remember them.

This essay, therefore, is a look at our California pioneers through the eyes of a man who has watched history being made. It's a story about our Western heritage by a man who wrote several books on the subject...books which he hand-lettered and illustrated with his warm and humorous pen-and-inkling sketches. Mr. Rambo still has that far away sparkle in his eyes as he tells us that we should never forget our past as we look forward to the future of our Valley.

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HE REMEMBERED OUR VALLEY

by

Tom Mach

I: Ralph Rambo: Historian Extraordinaire

I first had the pleasure of meeting Ralph Rambo in October, 1979 at a Santa Clara nursing home. I had read some of Mr. Rambo's historical books on the Santa Clara Valley and I was curious about the author.

I am not sure whom I expected to meet, but I supposed I was surprised at meeting a man who looked twenty years younger than he actually was. This tall, trim author moved with vigor, and his eyes sparkled as he started to tell me his most intriguing story...

Ralph Rambo was born in San Jose in a modest wood frame house ("Sunol Street," he recalls) in 1894. "I lived on a ten-acre prune orchard," he said, "and I'll tell you this much--I have no fondness for prunes because I had to pick them things¹ up from the hot adobe brick ground."

Rambo's main interest during much of his life was art, not history. He is a retired art director of Muirson Label Company (now a division of International Paper Company) in San Jose, but his interest in local history began to evolve soon after retirement. After discovering that "there was plenty of history about

¹Interview (10/20/79)

this valley, but no nostalgia," he wrote a book called Looking Backward, 1900, for his two small granddaughters. The enthusiasm of his friends for the book prompted him to write another--a 48-page hand-lettered and illustrated book entitled Almost Forgotten. This was a work brimming with little-known historical tidbits which were interwoven with his Twain-like sense of humor. For instance, he writes:

"Yes, there actually was a Battle of Santa Clara. It was fought in 1846 near present Lawrence Road and Highway 101. Casualties: four Mexicans. We won." ²

Rambo claims he has stories to tell which are not in any of his books. "Bet you never heard of the artificial eruption of Mt. Lassen in 1916," he writes in a letter to me. "It was electronically fired and appeared on the cover of Popular Mechanics in full color that year." ³

II. Childhood Memories

Much of the material for Rambo's early books on the history of the Valley is drawn from recollection of his childhood. He vividly recalled, in Almost Forgotten, his incredibly moving experience of the 1906 earthquake when he was only 12 years old: "We shiveringly emerged to view our new windmill and tank, a mass of twisted ruin. Dad and I whipped up horse and buggy townward, urged by morbid curiosity and mother's frantic order for sacks of sugar and flour. Everyone hoarded food." ⁴

Childhood memories continued to be a part of Rambo even in adult life. "I always wanted a Weeden Steam Engine," he says wist-

² Rambo, Almost Forgotten, p.23

⁴ Rambo, Almost Forgotten, p. 14

³ Letter from Rambo (12/17/79)

fully. "I finally bought one 30 years later--for me." ⁵ One of his favorite recollections was when he won a magic lantern as a prize for selling 50 packages. "Mama bought the last 47," ⁶ he adds.

To understand the history of the Valley, Rambo contends, one has to understand the turn-of-the-century environment. Rambo recalls, for instance, that in 1900, "getting dressed, hitching up a slow horse and driving to San Jose (from a distant farm) might consume an entire day." The country store ("one-room shopping centers," Rambo calls them) carried all the necessities of life--everything from lamp wicks to coffee grinders. ⁷ The kitchen of the 1900's was a "hot, inconvenient place of drudgery." To Rambo, "home on the range" meant Dad chasing down a chicken for the chopping block while Mom got the coals in the stove burning and then ran to the garden to dig potatoes from the back yard. ⁸

Remember When is a book that Rambo considers a sequel to Almost Forgotten, but he tries to minimize the historical importance of that book by stating emphatically in the preface that it is "nothing more than simple, rambling boyish memories of the Old Valley. Look for neither plot nor sex." ⁹

Although Remember When may be somewhat devoid of plot, it contains clear impressions of his early school days. "This was the Gingham Girl era and many of their dresses and boys' shirts were homemade. Cotton sacks served a double purpose. Flour and sugar came in 100 pound sacks. Mothers utilized this indelibly labeled material...the small girl's panties would proclaim:

⁵ Ibid., p. 28

⁸ p. 27

⁶ p. 28

⁹ Rambo, Remember When, p. 3

⁷ p. 26

'Snow Flake White' or 'Pure As The Drifted Snow.' We mean, of course, only if an errant wind, somersaults or a fence revealed these 1900 commercials." 10

When school would be over for the day, Rambo and his friends would stage grass fights, catch toads, or lasso lizards with the looped end of a barley stalk. "Lizard lassoing" was Rambo's favorite sport and he deplores the fact that this "exciting pastime" is almost forgotten.

III. Of Prominent Pioneers

Rambo holds a keen respect for our Valley Pioneers and has deep feelings about the likelihood of our forgetting them. He dislikes, for example, the irreverance that society has shown toward the memory of a man named Elisha Stephens. In Adventure Valley, he profiles Stephens as the first man to guide a wagon-train across the Sierras, the first to break a trail up the Truckee River route (thus opening a major immigration road to California), and the first American settler in the valley. Yet all our prominent places that bear his name--our creek, our dam, and our boulevard--are misspelled as STEVENS. "Elisha was said to have been illiterate," Rambo observes, "but he certainly knew how to spell his name!" 11

James Lick was another prominent pioneer which Rambo describes as a "cold, uncommunicative and lonely man who was always a puzzle to those that surrounded him. Here was one of California's first millionaires, possibly the Bay Area's greatest philanthropist and benefactor. Yet by many of his associates, he was labeled miserly, stubborn, selfish, solitary, penurious, cold and crabbed." 12

¹⁰ p. 6

¹¹ Rambo, Adventure Valley, p.13

¹² p. 40

Another famous individual Rambo delights in describing is Sarah Winchester, heiress to the Winchester Rifle fortune. Sarah arrived in the Santa Clara Valley in 1884 after the tragic deaths of her month-old baby girl and her husband. She purchased an eight-room house four miles west of San Jose and became absorbed over the next 38 years in building addition upon addition in the house...so that by 1922, the year she died, the house contained 160 rooms, 10,000 windows, a series of trap doors, stairs leading nowhere, and other strange things which led Ripley to list this house among other oddities he collected over the years.

Rambo personally knew Mrs. Winchester and he sets about in his book, Lady of Mystery, to disclaim many of the misconceptions people had about this strange woman. For example, it was rumored that President Theodore Roosevelt personally sought admittance to the house. Rambo claims that he was standing directly across the road that day when the President was driven directly by the house, but it was the San Jose Chamber of Commerce which had asked permission to show it off to Mr. Roosevelt...and it was the Chamber, not the President, which received her sharp "No!" Rambo adds that the full scope of her generosity went unnoticed. "I remember," says Rambo, "a small boy's thrill as he (Rambo) watched her liveried coachman alight from the polished Victoria and stagger up the church steps with a huge hamper of clothes...dozens of newly purchased garments! This was the Mrs. Winchester the writer and many another contemporary remembers. We never knew her intimately but how we now wish we had!" ¹³

¹³ Rambo, Lady of Mystery, p. 16

IV. Of Less Prominent Folks

Rambo would like to give equal prominence to those he considers our true Santa Clara Valley pioneers--the Indians. Unfortunately, no one knows when or from where these Indians came. One such Indian Rambo describes in Adventure Valley is Marcello, a 200-pound, 6-foot-tall giant (the average local Indian not as large as this.) Marcello and his contemporary Indian Chief Ynigo were once extensive land owners in the Valley (including some 2200 acres in the area of the Moffett Field-Alviso district). Interesting stories surrounded this man. One of these is that Marcello, in deference to the wishes of the missionaries, took a strong stand against polygamy--the traditional marital practice of his peers. Yet, strangely, all of his wives in his monogamous marriages lived short lives. It was rumored that Marcello killed them off with ground glass in their food.

Sing Kee was another unsung (pardon the pun) hero of Rambo's. A Chinese man who had started a laundry in Santa Clara in 1880, Sing Kee had quickly developed a reputation for accurately forecasting the weather. By the early 1900's, farmers actually preferred his forecast to those given by the U.S. Weather Bureau.

Another colorful character Rambo cites is "Cockeyed Charley" Parkhurst. Parkhurst's claim to fame was that during the years 1848 through 1879, Parkhurst drove a stagecoach through the Santa Cruz to San Jose route and in 1868 cast a ballot to vote ...making her the first woman in the U.S. to vote! (No one, it seems was aware that Parkhurst was a woman until her death in 1879!)

The present town of Gilroy would have been named "Cameron" had it not been for a quirk of fate. In 1814, John Cameron, an 18-year-old Scotsman was sick with scurvy and deserted his ship in Monterey. He took his mother's maiden name of Gilroy to avoid being discovered and, marrying a wealthy woman, fell heir to one third of her estate--almost 4500 acres, embracing most of the present Gilroy area. Gilroy died a pauper, losing his money and land to gambling.

V. Little-Known Facts About Our Valley

Rambo is fond of spicing his books with little-known facts about Santa Clara Valley. For instance he lists, in alphabetical order, the names of 71 elementary schools existing in the county in 1887. In this list was Rambo's Alma Mater--San Jose's Doyle School. This was a one-room schoolhouse with a pot-bellied stove for heating. "Teachers were nice looking, efficient ladies from San Jose Normal," says Rambo. "They wore shirtwaists, high net collars, and floor length skirts primly covering their twelve button high shoes." Sorrowfully, he adds: "Where is the original Old Doyle School? Today buried deep beneath a new freeway crossing Stevens Creek Road. Thank Goodness, we can't bury memories!"¹⁴

In Remember When he sketches thirty objects and asks the reader to identify them. All of these objects were commonplace 70 years ago but now are rarities. Old-timers may still remember most of them: harness bells, boot-jack, hitchpost, and singletree....

In Almost Forgotten and Pioneer Blue Book, Rambo describes the origins of Valley locations that we take for granted today. Berryessa, for example, was named after the earliest settler in

¹⁴Rambo, Almost Forgotten, p. 21

a district located east of San Jose. Cupertino was named for an Italian saint, St. Joseph of Cupertino, by Padre Font of the De Anza expedition. Los Gatos was named after a Mexican grant entitled "Rinconado de los Gatos" in 1840. The literal translation of this is "the enclosed angle (or corner) of the cats"--an expression so used presumably because of the presence of bobcats or lynx in the Los Gatos mountains. ¹⁵

VI. The Truth Behind Rambo's "Fiction"

Few Santa Clara Valley inhabitants that Rambo had met as a youth escaped his attention when he wrote his books. Even though Me and Cy was his fictionalized account of a boy who found friends and adventure in the Alviso garbage dumps, Rambo admits that the story borders on the truth. "I enjoyed writing about Me and Cy," he says, "In fact, I knew all of those characters." But in the introduction to this book, Rambo invites the reader to "label it to fit your reactions--fiction, distortion, fable, escape reading, or simply a pocket-size pack of lies." ¹⁶

Sierra Santa is Rambo's fictionalized account of an old man in the Sierras who resembles Santa Claus. In the story, the old man befriends a seven-year-old girl who owns a St. Bernard dog named "Big Bertha." The old man and the girl discover a fortune in gold coins in a cave where the dog had gone to have her pups. "You see," Rambo related to me in a letter, "Sierra Santa was actually my wife's Uncle Charley, and he was actually a Mariposa prospector. He never struck it rich except in the joyful expectations of the morrow...The gold is still hidden in that vicinity..." ¹⁷

¹⁵ Rambo, Almost Forgotten, p. 36

¹⁷ Letter from R. Rambo (12/17/79)

¹⁶ Rambo, Me and Cy, p. 3

VII. Mapping Out Our Valley's History

In addition to his growing fame as an author, Rambo received some notoriety for his maps. Congressman Charles Gubser framed a Rambo map in his Washington, D.C. office, where it drew considerable attention from visitors. In 1977, when the city of San Jose celebrated its 200th anniversary, Rambo was commissioned to design the official cachet for the envelopes and commemorative seals to be used for that occasion. Rambo admits, however, that his proudest moment came when he was asked to personally present one of his maps to ex-President Gerald Ford.

Rambo's maps are filled with lively illustrations of turn-of-the-century scenes and witty observations. In one edition of his map of old Santa Clara Valley he has cartoon drawings of such things as a prune orchard with this footnote: "Sour childhood memories almost prevented this touching horticultural scene depicting the prune industry, little changed over the years." In another part of the map (located south of Saratoga) Rambo illustrates a man running from a bear and he adds this comment: "Mountain Charley Road is named for Charley McKiernon who in 1854 tangled with a female bear in this locale. He survived, but his punctured skull was patched with two silver 50-cent pieces." ¹⁸

VIII. Remembering The People Who Made This Valley Great

Pen-and-ink illustrations of historical episodes, both comical and serious, famous and not-so-famous, are included in Rambo's books. He delights in not only telling, but in showing the reader the way it was back then--the country roads, the simple

¹⁸ Rambo, Almost Forgotten, p. 23

kitchens of the 1900's, the one-room schoolhouse, and, of course, the people.

It is the people who made our valley great that interests Rambo the most. His fondest hope is that America will not forget the contributions to a dream that these hardy, joyful, and visionary people--our Valley pioneers--left us. In a 1978 Christmas card verse, Rambo writes:

"Who can say when our Valley began?
When mountains were formed and rivers first ran?
Volcanoes, earthquakes, what part did they play?
In forming our Valley of dim yesterday?
Who heard the first bird song, coyote's sad call?
How old our great oaks, sequoias so tall?
Who seeded our wild flowers, our meadows, our pines?
What formed the cinnabar in Almaden's mines?
When came the wildcats, the grizzlies, the deer?
Animals free from all human fear?
From whence came the Indian gentle and shy?
Our Valley's First People, a race left to die?
All mysteries--unanswered--so turn history's pages
Inscribed by explorers and wise padre sages." ¹⁹

#

¹⁹"Mystery Valley" (a 1978 Christmas Carol by R. Rambo)



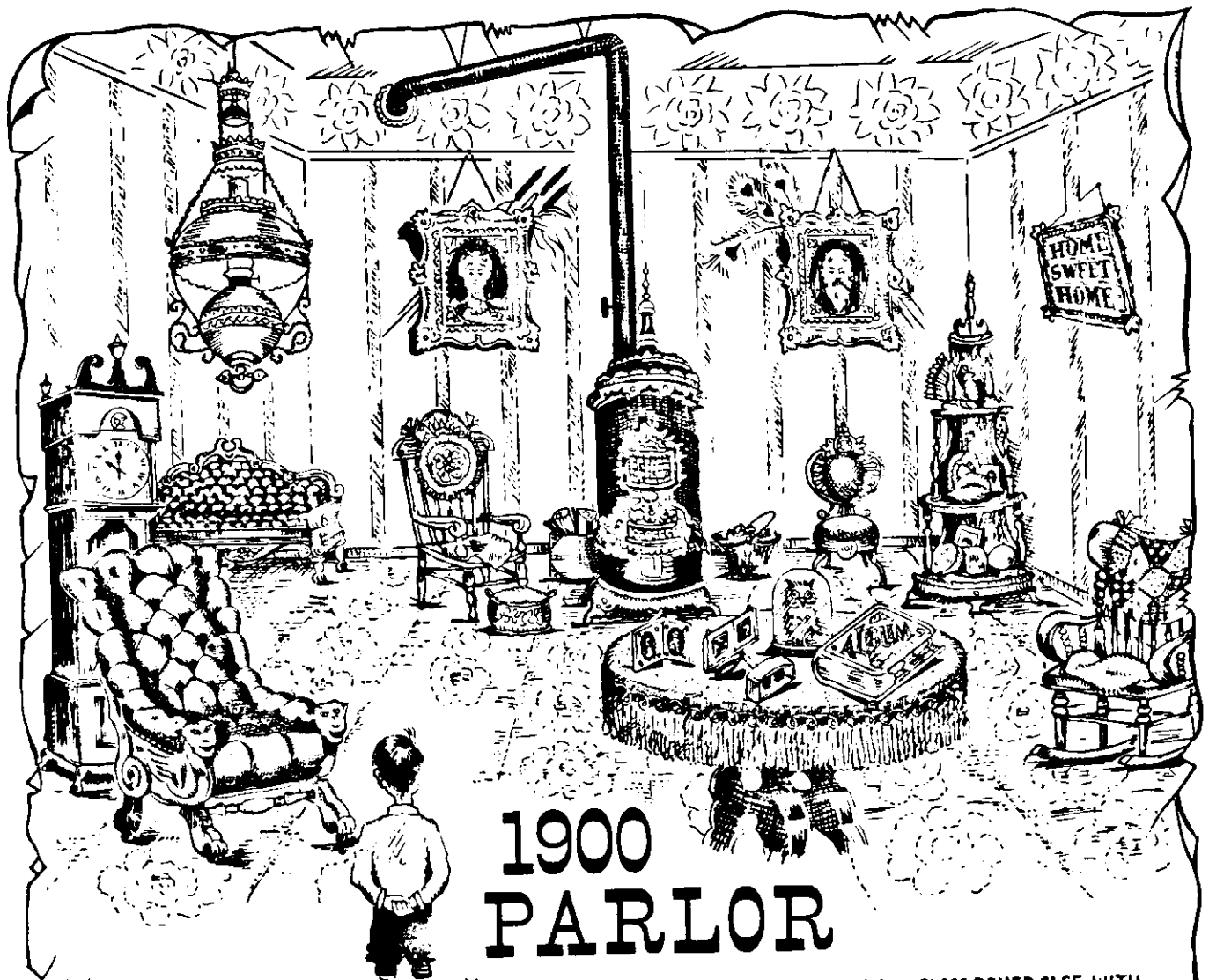
ANCIENT HISTORY

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Adios R

Cartoon
PEN & INKLINGS OF THE OLD
SANTA CLARA VALLEY

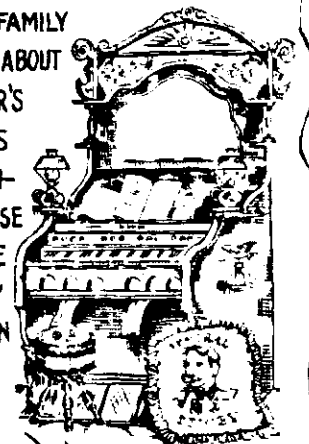
Cartoon

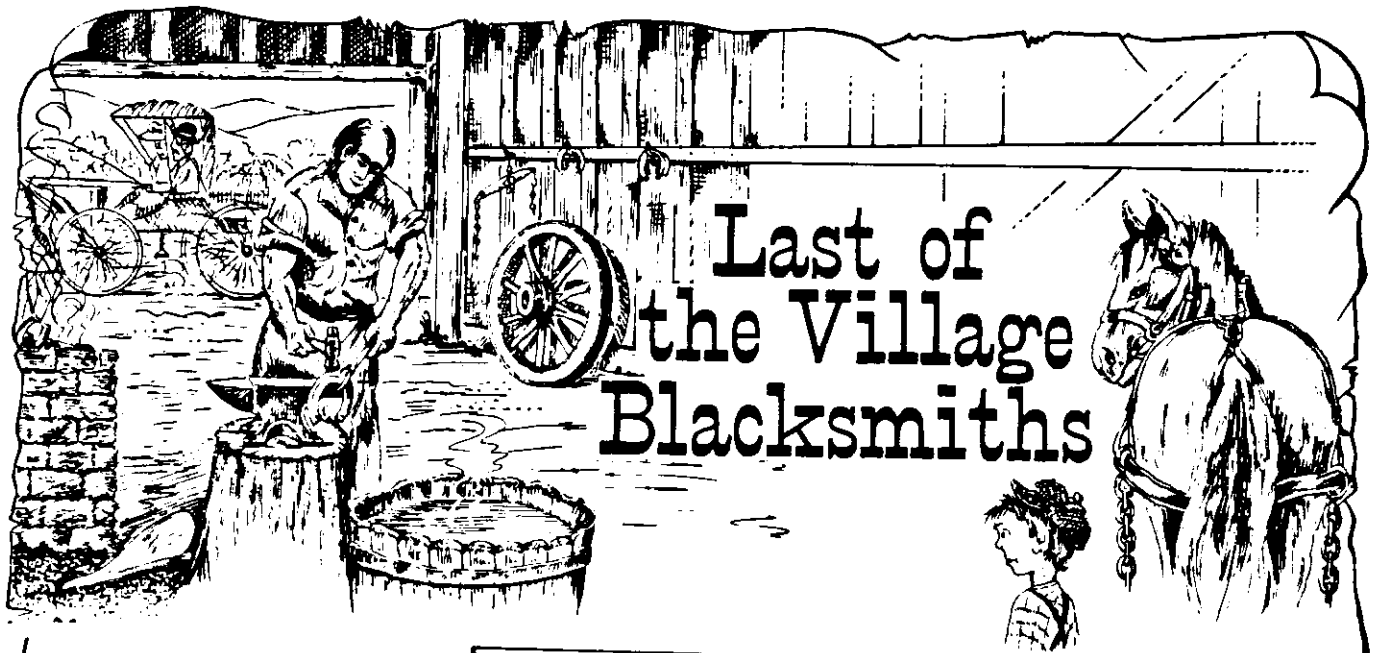


1900 PARLOR

WITH THE EARLY SETTLERS IN SANTA CLARA VALLEY CAME THEIR MIDWESTERN PARLOR. FOR OUR YOUNGER GENERATION THE BEST DEFINITION OF A PARLOR IS TO SAY IT WAS EXACT OPPOSITE OF TODAY'S RUMPUS ROOM. IT WAS A PLACE OF DIGNITY WITH BLINDS PULLED DURING THE WEEK, RAISED ONLY TO BROOM-SWEEP OR FEATHER DUST. THIS OPERATION SIMPLY MOVED DUST FROM ONE LOCATION TO ANOTHER AND LEFT A STRANGE, SOLEMN, FUNERAL ODOR, (AND FOR SUCH OCCASIONS OUR PARLOR WAS SO USED).....ON THE OTHER HAND, THE ROOM HELD JOYOUS SCENES SUCH AS WEDDINGS, RELATIVE REUNIONS, SUNDAY VISITORS AND CHRISTMAS CELEBRATIONS.....IT WAS THE FAMILY MUSEUM, "WHATNOT" AS CENTERPIECE.....THIS MIGHT DISPLAY AN OSTRICH EGG, BABY SHOE, SHARK'S TOOTH, SEA SHELL CONTAINING ALLEGED OCEAN ROAR, STUFFED BIRD, TINTYPES

OF BUG-EYED RELATIVES AND GLASS DOMED CASE WITH A LOCK OF AUNT MARY'S CURLS. ALWAYS A PAIR OF EITHER KINDLY OR CRITICAL ANCESTORS LOOKED DOWN UPON US FROM THEIR ENORMOUS FRAMES. A VISIT COULD BE LIGHTENED BY A ROUND WITH THE STEREOSCOPE AND LATEST SLIDES OF DEWEY'S FLEET OR THE RUSSO-JAPANESE WAR. THE FAMILY ALBUM WAS LAST RESORT AND ABOUT AS EXCITING AS LAST YEAR'S ALMANAC. WE YOUNGSTERS AVOIDED THE LEATHER FURNITURE WITH STABBING HORSE HAIR. YET SOMEHOW I BELIEVE OUR ANCESTORS WOULD ENJOY A MODERN LIVING ROOM, EVEN A FEW WHO WOULD GO FOR THE RUMPUS ROOM!





PICTURED AT RIGHT, THE VILLAGE CORNERS OF WEST SIDE, NOW CUPERTINO. THIS WAS AND IS THE INTERSECTION OF STEVENS CREEK ROAD AND SUNNYVALE-SARATOGA ROAD. (HWY. 9) BAER BLACKSMITH SHOP FAR RIGHT. SKETCHED FROM 1898 PHOTO LOANED BY MRS. ARCH WILSON, MY DOYLE SCHOOL TEACHER.



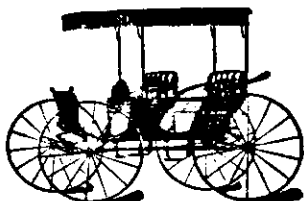
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LA CRIPPE, RHEUMATISM, COLDS

Rev. E. F. WALKER, the Presbyterian Evangelist, of Greencastle, Ind., writes: "The Oxydopur has well won its way in our household. We put it on some one of our family of eight frequently for various ailments, La Grippe,

LOOK AT THIS PICTURE.

THEN ON THIS



AN OBJECT LESSON

Gasoline is dangerous, Coalex-
pensive, wood
a nuisance

USE GAS

**SAN JOSE
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Old Valley Ads

THESE ADS WERE CUT FROM MCCLURES AND SAN JOSE MAGAZINES OF THE 1898-1903 PERIOD. EVEN IN THOSE DAYS WE HAD PERSUASIVE ADVERTISING AND DANGEROUS PROMISES. THEN IN 1906 CAME THE PURE FOOD & DRUG ACT. "LYDIA" AND PERUNA WERE MADE TO DECLARE 15 AND 22% ALCOHOLIC CONTENT, RESPECTIVELY, IN THEIR "REMEDIES." MY DAD HAD AN "ELECTRIC BELT" AS AN "ENERGIZER" AND "CURE" FOR RHEUMATISM. BUT HE WENT BACK TO A BUCKEYE SEED IN HIS PANTS POCKET. SAID HE GOT BETTER RESULTS.



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- (2) Almost Forgotten by R. Rambo, Rosicrucian Press (1964)
- (3) "Cartoon Map of Old Santa Clara Valley" (1969)
- (4) Interview by Tom Mach with Ralph Rambo on 10/20/79 (portions of the transcriptions of that interview follow this bibliography)
- (5) Lady of Mystery by R. Rambo, Rosicrucian Press (1967)
- (6) Letter from R. Rambo to T. Mach dated 12/17/79 (copy of that letter follows)
- (7) Lo, The Poor Indian by R. Rambo, Rosicrucian Press (1967)
- (8) Me and Cy by R. Rambo, Rosicrucian Press (1966)
- (9) "Mystery Valley" (a 1978 Christmas Carol R. Rambo sent to me)
- (10) Remember When by R. Rambo, Rosicrucian Press (1965)
- (11) Sierra Santa by R. Rambo, Rosicrucian Press (1971)

Transcript of Interview with R. Rambo (10/20/79)
(interview recorded by Tom Mach, author of essay)

I was born in San Jose, Sunol Street to be exact, in 1894. I lived on a 10-acre prune orchard, and I'll tell you this much--I have no fondness for prunes because I had to pick them things up from the hot adobe brick ground. I was art director for the Muirson Label Company (now the International Paper Co.) and I did a great deal of drawing and lettering there.

When I took up this writing during my retirement, I discovered there was plenty of history about this Valley, but no nostalgia.

By hand-lettering my books, I saved the expense of typesetting them, which was something like \$20 an hour. As it turned out, I hadn't had any complaints about the legibility, and it was something new. There aren't many books that are hand-lettered.

I didn't do any writing until I was almost 70 years old. For me, life began at 70. I not only wrote the books but I produced several maps.

Here's a map of California that the city of San Jose gave to President Ford when he was out here. I have a letter from President Ford acknowledging it, and it's not a form letter. It's the real McCoy.

One landmark that's particularly interesting to me is Stevens Creek Boulevard. I saw it when it was a two-lane gravel road, and there was a house every half-mile or so. I went to Doyle School, which was a one-room schoolhouse with a pot-bellied stove. The school was located near present-day Cupertino.

Then I went to Santa Clara High School for my advanced education, you might call it. I didn't go to college. I'm the only one left of my

schoolmates--the last of the Indians.

The thing I remember most is the earthquake of 1906. No one here realizes what an 8.3 Richter scale earthquake is like. At the time we were living out in Cupertino. My father had just bought a new windmill and tank. He had pumped the tank full of water (5,000 gallons) and the earthquake hit the next morning at 13 minutes past 5. The tank and windmill toppled over and 5,000 gallons of water ran through the kitchen.

I'm glad that I lived when I did, that I saw these historic things when they actually happened. It was a beautiful valley then...all orchards and vineyards.

I enjoyed writing about Me and Cy. In Me and Cy, I knew all those characters. Course, I exaggerated them and fictionalized a little, but those characters all lived and they lived in a colony in Alviso, the garbage dump.

Some of the people recognized themselves in the characters I had created and told me about it.

Adventure Valley deals with characters that I admire. Incidentally, I drew the map that shows the ranchos. That took an enormous amount of research. I worked Clyde Arbuckle on it (NOTE: Clyde Arbuckle was California's leading historian).

Oh, one other thing. All those signs on Stevens Creek Boulevard are wrong--they were named after Capt. Elish Stephens. Guess they didn't know how to spell his name.

Letter From R. Rambo To T. Mach, Dated 12/17/79 (page 1 of 2)

a shot of
Seasonal
Greetings

12-17-79

Dear Tom

Looking thru a batch of my old books I keep on hand mainly as "bribe" in this lush joint, I ran across a lonely copy of "Sierra Santa". Considerin' the season this just might tickle your fancy including your wife's? Why? Long out of print do you know I get letters regularly saying "Well, we just got our copy of Sierra Santa out and joyfully reread it." I never pushed this book, probably sold less than 50,000. But I enjoyed writing it and illustrating the characters. It did sell well up and down Hiway 49. Unfortunately it's a "Christmas seller" and that dooms any book. I prefer the type that brings in that steady semi-annual royalty check.

You see Sierra Santa was actually my wife's Uncle Charley, and he was actually a Mariposa prospector that "worked" the community as related. He never struck it rich except in the joyful expectations of the morrow. Otherwise the characters are somewhat fictional. The gold is still hidden in that vicinity and I thoroughly researched the \$50⁰⁰ octagonal slugs and the early small mints in that vicinity. Mariposa is still as I describe it and so is the cabin. Otherwise the characters have all passed away, dog & mule included years ago. I repeat - the gold is still there. I saw a \$50 slug in your coin shop. Perfectly rich. 3000⁰⁰ mint condition \$10,000⁰⁰.

Anyway perhaps this will imbue you with the Christmas spirit as it still seems to perform for loyal readers. Such books as this and Met by are a

Letter,....(page 2 of 2)

joy to fabricate. No, not fabricate - they both were based on characters I intimately knew.

But you never heard of the artificial eruption of Mt. Lassen in 1916. electronically fired and appearing on cover of Popular Mechanics in full color on that year. Or the Pacific States Fireworks Co. of Los Gatos, article written for Mercury by two of my close ^{historical} friends that curled my toes. So misrepresented in romantic detail it curled my toes. My mouth is closed but what a story it could have been

Well this is sent merely to inject a little Christmas spirit's outside a bottle.

Thanks for wife's note



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