

1988
Honorable Mention
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Ralph Rambo

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Pen &
Inklings
by

**Ralph
Rambo**

his books
are
Sugar
Coated
History

See
Story
inside

Table of Contents

- I. Ralph Rambo - his books pgs 2,3,4,5
- II. Ralph Rambo - his education, jobs,
and youth pgs 5,6,7
- III. Ralph Rambo - Memory Lane pgs 7,8,9,10
- IV. Ralph Rambo - Achievements pgs 10,11
- V. Footnotes pgs 12,13
- VI. Bibliography pgs 14,15

Be thankful the "eternal mountains" still embrace our explosive valley! Otherwise all else has long been changed. For nostalgic or informative revival, we can only quote history or old memories.

The generally authentic cartoons and brief comments are for inquiring young people, inquisitive newcomers, and the few old-timers who still remember. If at times our subject may seem lightly treated, be assured throughout this attempted preservation at least we aimed for the TRUTH.

- Ralph Rambo
Almost Forgotten

The junction of Sunnyvale-Saratoga Road and Steven's Creek Road is two lanes wide.

Sarah Winchester is a direct target for Valley gossip. Horse and buggies are the main source of transportation.

There is one post office in all of Cupertino called West Side.

There is a 10 acre prune orchard on Miller Avenue and Steven's Creek Road.

This is the setting of Ralph Rambo's most memorable part of his lifetime. It is the basis on which he began his second career at age 70. He has written 11 books since the time of his first published one, in 1964.

"I am not a historian. I am a nostalgician," Ralph Rambo repeated his conviction that history should be sugar-coated in a nostalgic, humorous way the reader can identify with.¹

Rambo says that it all started when he searched book stores and libraries for a nostalgic book on Santa Clara Valley history to give to his granddaughters.

"I was amazed. I couldn't find anything nostalgic... there were plenty of names and dates and events, but that was all," he recalled.¹

"I undertook writing as a hobby but it turned into a surprisingly successful business venture. I couldn't believe how hungry people are for local history. I call mine 'sugar-coated' because its easy to swallow."²

"No apology is offered for the erratic, often shaky, hand lettered text. At least it seems to fit our

informal, rural scenes and characters so much better than cold type. I don't think anyone else in the country is crazy enough to hand letter his books. I have nothing else to do. Why not?" Rambo added that the money saved on typesetting was tremendous. He also explained, "When there's a mistake, there's no one to blame but yourself."⁴

An average page in one of Rambo's books took approximately 15 hours between hand-lettering and illustrating. He recalled doing nine pages over in one of his books before a second edition because of slips in the first printing. "I am office boy, author, illustrator, handletter and distributor. I try to autograph practically all of my books... people, for some reason, like that little personal touch."⁴

A lot of comprehensive research turned the artist-writer into a scholar of history. The first book he wrote was never published for the public. It was called "Looking Backward 1900." "I went out and bought a bunch of three-hole binders. You could get them for 35 cents in those days. I paid someone \$50 to mimeograph the hand-lettered pages and bound them together myself," Rambo said.⁵ It was this book, distributed to friends and relatives, that recieved so much encouragement, and lead Rambo onto his career.

"Almost Forgotten", his first book published for the public in 1964, was in its third edition and had sold 8,000 copies by the end of the year.⁶

"Sierra Santa" was inspired by Rambo's late

wife's Uncle Charley. "He lived near Mariposa, and the fact that he never struck any gold vein or gold, larger than 'skeeter's eyes' failed to discourage him. He was known to Mariposa as 'Dull Pick Charley.'" ⁵

"The Little House" was also inspired by another Charley, Rambo knew. Charley Wright's privy had a sign on the wall that urged the user, when ready to leave, to pull a chain hanging down from the ceiling. The victim would comply and thereby toll an old school bell hung above in an oak tree, its announcement heard all the way to Los Gatos. ⁶

"'Me and Cy' is my favorite. There's more truth than fiction in it. It all existed, though I changed their names," Rambo explained. ⁷ "Me and Cy" is about Rambo and his relationships with the people living in Alviso.

"'Pen and Inklings' does not seek the status of an historical book. It has too many diversified ingredients - too remindful of old-fashioned beef stew, - a little too heavy on the corn," Rambo said. ⁸

One of Rambo's most popular maps is a map of the Santa Clara Valley, oversized in cartoon drawings. Every square inch of it was painstakingly drawn through a magnifying glass that had once belonged to his grandfather. Rambo hid initials of family members throughout the map and recalls having fun drawing it. ⁸

Other books include "Remember When...", sequel to "Almost Forgotten"; "Lo, the poor Indian"; "Tiburcio Vasquez - the California bandit"; "Adventure Valley";

and the "Pioneer Blue Book of the Santa Clara Valley"; and a collection of maps.

His books have been used as history references in local schools and at least three of them have been translated into Braille by the Library of Congress.[†]

Ralph Rambo is a native of the Santa Clara Valley. He attended Doyle School on Stevens Creek Road with an entire enrollment of 20 students for eight grades. It was a typical country school with one room and a big pot-bellied stove in the middle.[‡]

Many attended school only between seasonal orchard work since children played an important economic part in the Valley. The majority of the pupils were mixed Portugese, American, or Italian descent from "modest" income families. Levi's and homemade shirts were the boy's attire and the girls wore gingham dresses by Butterick patterns.[§]

Most teachers in the county were graduates from San Jose State Normal School and usually taught a range of grades in one school house.

Rambo fondly remembers he and friends journeys to and from school - staging grass fights, exploring dry creeks, bird's nests, and catching toads.

During the canning season, "I created a strong dislike for child labor while picking prunes," Rambo recollects. "We were paid 8¢ a box of apricots. The larger the apricots, the quicker we could finish cutting a box of 'cots'. If you were unlucky enough to draw

a fifty pound box of 'marbles', it was a tragic situation requiring several hours for completion."⁹

Doyle School is gone now, buried underneath an eight lane freeway. "Thank goodness," says Rambo, "we can't bury our memories."¹⁰

Rambo graduated from Santa Clara High School in 1912.³ He then attended the San Francisco School of Fine Arts, "where I learned nothing whatever," Rambo said.¹¹ Then he enrolled in a correspondence cartoon course while he was still a teenager. "The 'School' was actually one man, a retired, famous cartoonist. With each drawing lesson, he returned it with his personal criticisms. It was \$25 for 25 lessons."⁹

He then landed a job at a new printing plant called Muirson in 1916, until 1966. "The pay was \$7 a week. After I was married and we had a baby, I was raised to \$9. Printing was still in an antique period, just out of the woodcut stage. The plant wanted some labels designed. I was paid \$15 each for some, and that was big money."³

In the early days, Rambo recalled, a label usually had its inception when a canner or wholesale grocer would show up at the Muirson Building with a vague idea of what he wanted. Sometimes, he didn't even have a brand name chosen, so the artist or printer would make one up.¹²

Rambo's first step was a water-color sketch followed by a key drawing precisely outlining the areas of the color separation printing plates needed.

When Rambo first went to work, color photography was primitive and half-tone engraving, which used a screen to break up images into printable dot patterns, had not yet arrived on the labeling scene. Consequently, everything depended on the artist, who would paint a picture for the label and then break it down into color-separation printing plates by the hand-stipple process, painting each dot of each color manually. Five plates were made for each picture: yellow, light blue, dark blue, red and pink.¹²

In 1920, Rambo became the art director of the plant, which grew with the fruit canning boom in the Valley. He eventually headed a staff of eight.³ In 1950, the Muirson Label Co. turned out 5 million of the canning labels a day from its plant at 435 Stockton Ave. for canned goods sold all over the world. "The Valley of Heart's Delight" produced more than $\frac{1}{3}$ of all the fruit canned in the world during this time. Rambo retired in 1966 as art director after 50 years working at the plant. Muirson is now called the International Paper Company.¹²

What was the inspiration in Rambo's life to begin another career? He simply wanted to give something to his two granddaughters, Katherine and Ann, so they could see what the Valley was like at the turn of the century.

As a youngster, Rambo disliked the way history was taught in school. "It was too dry, memorizing dates, names, battles, without any amusing description

of the way of life. Actually, this dislike was an asset, - as it formed the basis of my books, which I based on nostalgia, describing the way of the pioneers."⁴

Today, Rambo says, "I don't believe in griping about the old days. I feel fortunate to have enjoyed both eras," he said.⁸

Rambo recalls growing up on his family's farm, a 10-acre prune orchard that was off Stevens Creek Road on Miller Avenue where a million dollar school lies today.¹³

"The pace of life was much slower then. There were no conveniences like bathrooms and running water, but it didn't worry us.

"My father hauled water on a sked in a barrel to our house. The first running water we had," Rambo said, "was piped from a neighbor's windmill and tank to a faucet in our front yard. I shot off a whole package of fire-crackers to celebrate."⁸

"I suppose many of us youngsters verged on the delinquent. We smoked dry prune or walnut leaf cigarettes, or, with many puffs, vainly tried to keep anise aglow.

"On Valentine's day, we bought those hideous colored one sheet cartoons called 'penny awfuls' with an insulting verse we intended to match up with our victim's personality.

"We shot birds, chickens, cats, and family cows with our sling shots and Daisy air rifles."⁹

"We knew every neighbor, every orchard, every tree and windmill on the route. Sometimes, we halted and passed the time of day whenever we met friends. Dad would draw

up the reins and visit for about 15 minutes.

"Today, if someone stopped for 15 minutes at the same spot, there would be irate motorists, bumper-to-bumper, and four miles of honking."⁵

"We never owned an automobile or tractor. Mom argued that at least they didn't stand in the barn eating their heads off when they weren't working. Dad's rebuttal was '... Neither of these machines would ever be perfected.'¹⁴

"Mother was the President of the West Side (Cupertino) Ladies Aid Society. I remember every year during the clothes drive for the needy, especially children, Sarah Winchester driving up to our church in her carriage with her coachman. He would carry a huge assortment of brand new children's clothing specially purchased for this drive and then he would quietly leave."⁹

"We lived close by Mrs. Winchester and saw her often (from a distance.) My Uncle Ned Rambo was the first west coast agent for her company. My father's first work in California in the (18)80's was tree planting on her new estate. We thought highly of her. For over 30 years that \$1000 a day was distributed amongst the workers in the Valley."¹⁴

Rambo remembers more easily, he claims, things that happened at the beginning of the century easier than what happened, say, last week. He witnessed Mrs. Winchester, the 1906 earthquake - "the shock of my life" - he claims, from horse and buggies to automobiles and the Valley growth. "I saw Stevens Creek go from a two-way gravel road to what it is today. We'd run half a mile to see an automobile. I'm happy I lived

in that period rather than the next 80 years."⁷

While basis of his prolific writing is nostalgic and boyhood reminiscences, he says he's also "enjoying the present in grateful contentment."²

Ralph Rambo was born on May 16th, 1894, at 10 Sunol St. in San Jose. Commenting on his growth he said, "I was 6 feet 2 1/2 inches, but they say you shrink a little as you grow older."

Rambo married a childhood sweetheart, Katherine Coker, who passed away after 37 years of marriage. Their son, James, was a curator of the California Palace of Legion of Honor, has passed away, also. Their second son, William, is a retired Stanford engineering professor, living in the area.³ He is proud that one of his granddaughters is now a budding journalist.¹

He now spends his pastimes corresponding with friends, watching television, and enjoying the company of his son, Bill.¹³

Ralph Rambo has had a very full life and has reaped many rewards. At a bicentennial program in 1976, a book by Frances Fox and a map of Rambo's was featured. President Ford praised Rambo's work at the program and Rambo had the honor of shaking hands with the President - or President Ford had the honor of shaking Rambo's hand. Later, Rambo received a personal thank you on white house stationery that he added to his bulging collection of tributes and awards.^{1,3}

In 1983, the mayor of Los Gatos honored Ralph Rambo by declaring a 'Ralph Rambo Day.' This heralded

the opening of "Old Valley Rambolings" at the Forbes Mill Museum in Los Gatos. The exhibit was open through November of that year. The only artifact missing from the exhibit was Rambo's massive roll-top desk, the center ring of his creative activity over the past two decades.^{10,11}

Rambo philosophized, "I maintain that an oldster that hasn't something that he's interested in or some project is dead."⁴

He went on, "I'm glad I realized the fact that without a hobby, or pastime, or engagement in some creative work, the senior citizen is completely lost. The drawing and writing started a new era, a new world, for me."³

Footnotes

- 1 Diann O'Connell, "Ralph Rambo Nostalgia Brings Local History to Life", The Santa Clara American, May 19, 1977, page 5.
2. See number 6
- 3 Mildred Hamilton, "An artist's 2nd career began 20 years ago at 70." San Francisco Examiner and Chronicle, May 29, 1983, pages 1,2.
- 4 Al Mason, "Ralph Rambo Recreates the Valley Story", Valley Home and Living Supplement, Jan. 22-25, 1969, page number unavailable.
- 5 George Lajeunesse, "Historical stew is rich in Valley flavor", San Jose Mercury News, Jan. 28, 1985, pages 1B and 4B.
6. Frances L. Fox, "A New Career In Nostalgia", San Jose Mercury News, June 12, 1977, pages unavailable.
- 7 Carolyn Leal, "Memory lane is Ralph Rambos favorite Street ", Santa Clara SUN, Nov. 27, 1973, page 5.
- 8 Paula Belshaw, "Ralph Rambo - A Legend in his Own Lifetime", Valley Journal Special Centennial Issue, Sept. 29, 1972, page 21C.

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9. F. Ralph Rambo, Remember When, The Rosicrucian Press, Ltd., San Jose, Ca., 1965.

10. —, "Ralph Rambo Still Making History", The Trailblazer, August 1983, Volume 24, Number 3.

11. Jose Stell, "Nostalgician sketches memories of life in the Valley", San Jose Mercury News, July 13, 1983, page 4 North.

12. Harry Farrell, "A taste of nostalgia going on display", San Jose Mercury News, Nov. 30, 1984, page number unavailable.

13. Patricia Smith, "Santa got fired up", San Jose Mercury News, Dec. 1987, History, Special to Extra, page number unavailable.

14. F. Ralph Rambo, Almost Forgotten, The Rosicrucian Press, Ltd., San Jose, Ca., 1964.

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