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LOS GATOS

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## INTRODUCTION

"No one who reads it can deny that Los Gatos has had a most fascinating history."<sup>1</sup> George G. Bruntz made this statement in his book, the History of Los Gatos, after 41 years of living in Los Gatos and participating heavily in the community. Many residents of Los Gatos sometimes take for granted the wonderful town they live in. Yet, one can fully appreciate Los Gatos by simply looking at its fabulous history. The history of Los Gatos can best be studied in three basic parts, the early beginnings, later development, and its present state.

## LOS GATOS

There are many stories as to how Los Gatos got its name, but probably the one most widely recognized is the story of Jose Hernandez. In 1839, Jose Hernandez ventured from his home in San Jose in search of a wider horizon for his growing family. He and his men made their way through the Santa Cruz Mountains to the sea, then retracing their steps by a circuitous route, they came to a meadow below the north slope of the mountains. Here, was an ideal spot for a homestead if water was accessible. Two wildcats fighting in the grass nearby convinced them that there must be water nearby; sure enough, there was. One of the men with Hernandez discovered San Tomas Creek shortly after. Later, the Mexican government granted Hernandez and his partner, Sebastian Peralta, 6631 acres of land. They named the area Rinconada de Los Gatos, which in spanish means the corner of the cats, since it was the cats that led Hernandez to water.

Upon one hundred acres of the land of Rinconada de Los Gatos was where the original town of Los Gatos was founded in 1868. Los Gatos was at first called Jones Mill, named after Zacharia Jones who in 1849 purchased a sawmill near Lexington. Next, the town was called Forbes Mill and later Forbestown, named after James Alexander

Forbes who, in 1850, built a four-story flour mill along the Los Gatos Creek.

After Los Gatos was first founded, more people began to settle in the area because of three main events. One event was the booming logging industry which made the Lexington Mountain a commercial and industrial center. Another event was the building of the Southern Pacific Railroad. The third event was the building of the Santa Cruz Turnpike. It was greatly due to these three events that Los Gatos became an important town and was incorporated in 1887.

Los Gatos not only became successful because of the logging industry, Southern Pacific Railroad, and the Santa Cruz Turnpike, but also because of its good climate and beautiful landscapes. "As early as 1868 Bayard Taylor, the world traveler, is said to have stood at the foot of the Santa Cruz Mountains and exclaimed: 'How shall I describe a landscape so unlike anything else in the world--with the beauty so new and dazzling that all ordinary comparisons are worthless'".<sup>1</sup> Later, in an issue of the San Jose Mercury in September 1887 you find this quote, "While beautiful pictures cost money and must be insured, the grand, ever-changing panorama of mountains, valleys, orchards, vineyards, country homes...such as a resident of Los Gatos has always before him, costs nothing". Day after day it presents before him, new features of beauty, new reasons for admiration." Los Gatos has been referred to as "a dream city among the

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1. George G. Bruntz, History of Los Gatos, p.1

picturesque foothills...Even today, experienced travelers, who have seen much of the world are taken with the beauty and climate of Los Gatos."<sup>2</sup> Los Gatos was a summer home for many wealthy people because of its beauty, and many poets have been attracted to it and inspired by it. For example, W. Drummond-Norie, a Los Gatos poet, wrote this poem praising Los Gatos:

L ying amid the green encircling hills,  
 O dorous with the perfumed breath of countless blooms:  
 S he basks in golden sunshine canopied with blue.  
 Gem-like and beautiful, a hamlet wondrous fair,  
 A dorned with roses, bright with poppy flowers.  
 T o see her is to love her. She calls you from your toil.  
 O ut from the city's gloom, and desert's heat:  
 S he bids you rest within her heart of hearts.

Another example of a poet expressing the beauty of Los Gatos is Ruth Comfort Mitchell, in the first poem she ever wrote.

The Rockies must be grander  
 And the Alps are more sublime,  
 And things are far more wonderful  
 In far-off foreign clime,  
 But for rich and natural beauty  
 And simple rustic grace  
 On all the earth's broad surface--  
 Los Gatos is the place.

The location of Los Gatos, nestled in the foothills of the Santa Cruz Mountains with an elevation of a little over 400 feet, shelters it from winds and fog. The average temperature yearround is 58.8. The location of Los Gatos with its beautiful landscapes and moderate climate helped to make it a success as a growing town. Thus, it has gotten its nickname, "gem of the foothills".

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2. Ibid

Although people were attracted to Los Gatos because of its beauty and mild climate, Los Gatos also became a great success due to its many industries. Forbes Mill was a center of industrial activity which continued for quite a while. After the bankruptcy of James Forbes, Forbes Mill was purchased by the W.H. Rogers Company in 1866 and many improvements were made upon it. Later, J.W. McMillan and Dr. W. S. McMurtry purchased half interest in the mill; shortly after it was incorporated as the Los Gatos Manufacturing Company. Many more improvements were made in the years following and by 1881 the mill was doing booming business. The mill produced some of the finest grade of flour known to the markets of the civilized world. The mill had a capacity of 100 barrels of flour a day which found a ready market in the east and elsewhere because of its high quality.

Not only was the Los Gatos Manufacturing Company successful in the production of flour, but also in other fields which it later expanded to. The mill had more power available than it could use so the company sublet some of it for other industries. For example, in 1869 a separate building was erected for a woolen mill and was used until 1872 when it burned down. More successful was the Los Gatos Ice Works which was set up near the mill, using some of its power. The business prospered and produced more than 25 tons of ice a day. The mill was very important to the growth of Los Gatos; it grinded flour, made ice, produced woolens, and formed the basis for the town in its earlier days.

There were many other prosperous industries in Los Gatos besides flour, ice and woolens. The mountains behind Los Gatos competed with the Los Gatos Creek in the development of Los Gatos. The settlers were attracted very early by the redwood timber. Lumber became the big industry during most of the 1850's and early 1860's. The sawmills produced more than 60,000 board feet of lumber a day. The business was so good that many miners even deserted the gold fields to take up lumbering.

Other industries of Los Gatos included those of oil and coal. On November 9, 1861 Joseph Smith discovered oil in the hills near Lexington. At the same time, oil was also discovered near Moody's Gulch about 100 yards from the Santa Cruz road. An oil fever struck which led to the mad search for oil and the development of oil fields. In 1865 a Mr. McLaren bored a well which struck oil in October 1870. The oil was said to have gushed up 85 feet. In 1878 William E. Youle drilled a well and struck oil at a depth of 800 feet. His next well struck oil at 765 feet. The third well went to 1080 feet and produced both gas and oil. A fourth well struck oil at three levels - at 980 feet, at 1040 feet, and at 1085 feet, producing more than 100 barrels a day. During the first ten days this well produced 1025 barrels, making it one of the most productive wells in California at that time. Many other oil wells were sunk so that at one time or another almost the entire mountain area from Alma to Wrights was in the midst of an oil fever. The search for oil also led to the discovery of coal in the Lexington area. On May 15, 1865 coal de-

posits were found and a company was organized to develop it. But coal proved to be of very short supply. The supply of oil and coal eventually ended.

Although there were many prosperous industries around Los Gatos, the real basis of the economy was fruit. The soil and climate were well-adapted to the raising of fruits of all kinds. Water was also plentiful since artesian wells could be opened anywhere in the valley. Some of the fruit grown included peaches pears, apricots, apples and some oranges. Figs, grapes, and other semi-tropical fruits produced well also. Los Gatos was said to have had even finer fruit than that of Florida and Southern California. The flourishing business of fruit growing caused a land boom in Los Gatos. Land that had been selling for \$15 to \$20 an acre, now sold for \$40 to \$60 an acre. Town lots were worth nearly as much per foot as they had formerly been per acre. Some land shot up to as much as \$200 and \$300 an acre.

The creation of more industries was influenced by the multitude of fruit being grown. The most popular and profitable fruit grown in the valley, the prune, started many fruit drying industries.

Luther Cunningham invented a machine for dipping prunes that revolutionized the process of drying fruit. He manufactured this machine and created an industry which later became a part of the huge Food Machinery Corporation. The dried prunes of the foothills of Los Gatos was considered better than the valley fruit. The H.D. Curtis Company was such a heavy packer of dried fruits in Los Gatos that it had a private spur from the railroad to accommodate the business. Curtis Company fruit was shipped all over to France, Belgium, England and Germany, selling over one and one-half million

pounds in one season. Shipping industries became profitable besides the drying yards.

Besides drying yards and the shipment of prunes, Los Gatos saw related industries develop from that of fruit growing. The easiest way to get fruit to market was to process it and put it into cans. Canneries soon sprang up all over the valley including Los Gatos. The Los Gatos Fruit Company was organized in 1882. Canneries prospered greatly; canned goods increased from 32,170 tons in 1894 to 61,426 tons just one year later in 1895.

There were still other industries that sprang from that of fruit growing. For example, several wineries began as a result of a large supply of grapes. Los Gatos was also the birthplace of one of the largest industrial establishments in the nation. One of the problems faced by the orchards was the destructive tree scale which attacked fruit trees of the valley. John Bean invented a high pressure spray pump which worked well in combating against the harmful tree scales. A company was created to mass produce the spray pump. Later this company developed into the huge FMC corporation of today.

As the industries of Los Gatos grew, so did many other things in the town. One important part of the town was the government. At first the town was run by five Trustees. Later, City Officials, Standing Committees and other boards were added. Other aspects of growth in Los Gatos were in the utilities. On April 14, 1888 a central water system was finally started. Street lights were put up shortly after the year 1888 also. A few years before this (in the middle 1880's) the first telephone service was established by the

Sunset Telephone and Telegraph Company.

Another part of Los Gatos that grew at a fast pace was its businesses. Several early hotels were the Lyndon Hotel, the Wilcox Hotel and the Coleman House. Some early stores included the A.F. Place Rurniture and Undertaking establishment which became a landmark business in Los Gatos and which still remains to this day. The H.J. Crall Store was a three-generation enterprise which sold candy and later expanded to sell toys, childrens books, school supplies, and stationary. Few people know that pianos were once made in Los Gatos. One of the pianos from the Schomberg Piano Factory was exhibited in Chicago and won a ribbon for excellence. Another business that few people know about was the Essanay Moving Picture Company. Businesses of all sorts sprang up and have been growing at a good rate up until this present day.

n Today Los Gatos is still growing and prospering. The population has risen from 4,907 in 1950 to 26,147 in 1981. Los Gatos has a more peaceful and beautiful atmosphere than that of large cities, yet it is close enough to San Francisco and other bigger cities to let residents enjoy their benifits. These benifits include such attractions as Marriotts Great America, Marine World, and countless others.

In addition to the attractions that can be taken advantage of in other nearby cities, Los Gatos has many attractions of its own. There are fine arts centers such as Villa Montavo which also has concerts, lectures, theater, art galleries, a statuary, nature trails, and dramatic lookout points over Santa Clara County. There

are many parks like Vasona, Oak Meadow, the Blossom Hill Park and others. In addition, there are countless clubs and organizations. Lexington Reservoir is not far off and neither are the beaches.

Los Gatos is truly a wonderful town to live in. Its remarkable history points out many of its interesting aspects that have made it the success it is today. A good climate and beautiful atmosphere make it a very attractive place to live. Successful industries, businesses and other growths have also kept it in continual prosperity. Los Gatos can be fully appreciated for its past which has led to a successful present and a bright future.

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