

RALPH RAMBO

Santa Clara Valley's Nostalgician

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California Pioneers
Santa Clara County
Historical Essay Contest

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RAMBO

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ANCIENT HISTORY

This map is a reproduction of the original map of the Santa Clara Valley, which was published in 1850. It is a valuable historical document, as it shows the layout of the valley and the locations of the various towns and cities. The map is a detailed and accurate representation of the valley, and it is a valuable historical document. It is a valuable historical document, as it shows the layout of the valley and the locations of the various towns and cities. The map is a detailed and accurate representation of the valley, and it is a valuable historical document.

Adios

STATION
PENITENTIARY OF THE CITY
SANTA CLARA VALLEY

INTRODUCTION

Santa Clara County is fortunate indeed to number among its citizens a well known author/illustrator whose name is Ralph Rambo. My first glimpse of Mr. Rambo's writings was through a book my mother received for Christmas. In researching this essay, I realized that this kind, elderly man, who could take the history of the Santa Clara Valley and turn it into lively books, was, himself, the perfect subject. A resident of Santa Clara County for eighty-three years, he has established a place in Santa Clara County's history.

EARLY LIFE

The "nostalgician" (a magician with nostalgia), Ralph Rambo, was born on Sunol Street, San Jose, in 1894. He was the sole child of Mr. and Mrs. F. H. Rambo. An average child, with brown hair and brown eyes, he had the usual dog and enjoyed Old Valley outdoor life. Unlike the rest of his life, the first six years were spent uneventfully.

At the age of six, Ralph Rambo entered his first school, Doyle Grammer School. This one-room school housed eight grades and twenty-five pupils. The students ranged in age from six to eighteen and were usually from families with modest incomes. It was at Doyle that Ralph Rambo learned his "three R's": reading, writing and arithmetic. His favorite assignments were drawing or the composition due every Friday. Even at this early age he could excel the teacher in drawing. He still chuckles when he recalls one occasion when his teacher tried to draw a pig and got the legs in the wrong place. The long, black stockings that had to be worn, the clanging of metal lunch pails and swapping of food, still bring fond memories of school to Mr. Rambo.

When Ralph Rambo was not at school, he was pursuing the usual activities that every boy of that era enjoyed. Baseball, marbles, kite flying, mumblety-peg and ex-

ploring dry creeks were just a few of the games boys played to occupy themselves. Much of this play was done to postpone the dreaded evening chores. In the summer there was another form of work: picking prunes and apricots. This gruesome occupation paid the younger generation only 5¢ to 6¢ a fifty pound box! First the prunes would have to be picked off the cloddy ground, dipped in lye and set in trays to dry. This form of stoop labor Ralph found totally unenjoyable. Fortunately he did not have to work every day so he had week-ends to enjoy the other happenings throughout the valley.

John Montgomery, the father of basic flying, made several glider flights over the valley providing Ralph with entertainment and dreams of flying. Ralph also went to see Barney Oldfield whiz by at sixty miles-per-hour at the long gone Agricultural Park. Quite often Ralph and his friends watched these events through fences, as money was not abundant in small boys' hands.

As Ralph Rambo grew older, he found that there were fewer and fewer people in his class and by the eighth grade he was the only one left. Looking for competition, he began attending Santa Clara High School in 1908. It was here in this three story red brick schoolhouse that he met his wife-to-be. She was the prettiest girl he had ever seen and she sat right next to him in his math class.

Without her and another smart boy's help Ralph might never have passed mathematics. If mathematics was not his favorite subject, botany and zoology were. In relating his experiences Ralph recalls the lessons in anatomy at school, when they used to boil dead cats, rats and dogs until nothing was left but their skeletons. Then they would take the bones apart and try to put the animal back together again. Fortunately for most dogs and cats this activity is no longer practiced in schools! Ralph also took a course in mechanical drawing at high school. This is something for which he is grateful, as it supplied him with a foundation for future employment. One would think that Ralph liked history, but he found history very boring. As he terms it, "History was too dry," too much time was spent memorizing names, dates and places. The history books lacked atmosphere; they never told the reader what people ate or what they did for amusement; they simply gave cold, dry facts.

In 1912, Ralph Rambo graduated from Santa Clara High School. Unfortunately, at the ceremonies there were only thirty-four out of thirty-five students attending. Ralph had caught the measles and was not present. While attending Santa Clara High School, Ralph's family had purchased ten acres of prune orchard off Miller Road. It was here that he spent many a day picking those dreadful prunes. After

his graduation, his father bought an apple orchard in Watsonville while the family rented a house in Aromas. Ralph was eighteen at the time, and it was the first house with electric lights and indoor plumbing in which he had ever lived. While living there, he took a correspondence course from a famous cartoonist. The course cost twenty-five dollars for twenty-five lessons, which was quite expensive when his father earned only \$1.50 a day as a part time laborer.

Ralph also spent many a pleasant hour writing to that pretty girl he had met in eighth grade. Finally his mother invited her to spend a weeks vacation. They fell in love immediately! The rest need not be told. A year later they were married, the next year was spent in a small house they built on the ranch. Then, due to their need for money, as apple raising was not profitable, Ralph and his wife moved back to San Jose to make an independent living.

EMPLOYMENT

In 1915 the twenty-two year old Ralph Rambo went to work for Muirson Label Company, which later became a division of International Paper Company. There he recieved a job in the foundry making lead plates, a job which left him black-faced everynight. His starting salary was seven dollars a week, but a kindly boss raised it to nine dollars a week when he learned Ralph was to become a father. Gradually he was promoted, and with his good ideas and drawing talent he soon became their Art Director. He gained much experience that would later be helpful in his books, from designing the fruit labels that decorated cans and boxes.

Ralph Rambo worked for Muirson Label Company for fifty years, from 1915 until 1965, when he retired at the age of seventy-two. During these fifty years of work his wife had borne him two sons, William and James. Encouraged by their parents, both boys attended college. The oldest, William, became a professor and later the Director of the Applied Electronics Laboratory at Stanford University. Meanwhile, the second son, James, became Curator of the Palace of Legion of Honor in San Francisco. In 1952 Ralph's beautiful wife died leaving an empty space in his life.

A SECOND CAREER

At seventy-two, Ralph Rambo retired from Muirson Label Company after fifty years of hard work. Ralph's sole belief is, "If you don't engage in a pastime or hobby after retirement you're dead!" He originally wrote a book for his granddaughters, hoping to describe life as it was in the Santa Clara Valley at the turn of the century. His first book was a typed manuscript with only a few pictures. Fifty copies of this book were made and given to some of Mr. Rambo's friends. After reading his book, entitled Looking Backward 1900, readers encouraged him to have a book formally published. So, in 1964 Ralph Rambo published Almost Forgotten. Much of this book came from Looking Backward 1900, but many more drawings were included. Adding to its old-fashioned atmosphere Ralph hand-lettered Almost Forgotten. This hand-lettering was to become a characteristic of all his books. After Almost Forgotten, nine other books followed: Remember When(1965), Lady of Mystery(1967), Me & Cy(1966), Lo, the Poor Indian(1967), Tiburcio Vasquez(1968), The Little House(1969), Adventure Valley(1970), Sierra Santa (1972), The Pioneer Blue Book(1973). Most of Ralph's books are truthful experiences with an introduction of humorous fiction here and there. "History with a lump of sugar," as he terms it.

Mr. Rambo's favorite book is Me & Cy, a story of his

childhood visits to Alviso. All of the characters are real, but Ralph does not hesitate to admit that some episodes are exaggerated.

Much of the information for his books comes either from his memory or from researching old "mug books"¹ that he has stacked in a corner of his apartment. He also has a collection of various old and rare books pertaining to the Santa Clara Valley which confirm and add authenticity to his stories.

It usually takes Ralph Rambo a year to write each book. In writing a book, he first researches the subject, then puts such knowledge into words. After this, four or five rough drafts are written until the book is perfected. Following the completion of these steps, he neatly types the manuscript and begins the laborious task of hand-lettering. The finishing touches are the charming drawings on each page that add to the atmosphere of the stories.

When he first started selling his books, he went in person to the various bookstores throughout the country selling his books on consignment. A good friend, Theron Fox, then sales manager for Rosicrucian Press Limited, suggested that Ralph have his books published and formally marketed. He took Theron Fox's advice and now all of his books are published and marketed by Rosicrucian Press Limited.

¹A book containing a brief history of the notable county residents, which for a fee, included pictures, thus the name, "mug books."

At one time he operated a mail order business, but as he grew older, the job became too strenuous. He still fills an occasional mail order, but usually lets Rosicrucian Press handle such details. As long as the royalty check comes every month, he is happy.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Ralph Rambo's greatest thrill was an order from the Winchester Mystery House for 20,000 copies of his book Lady of Mystery, to be sold at the Gift Shop. Running a close second to this is the thrill of San Jose's gift to President Ford, first editions of two of his books and his map of California. In return, President Ford cordially shook his hand and later sent him a personal "Thank-you" note which he displays with pride.

The Junior League of San Jose has found Ralph Rambo very helpful and has commissioned him for a number of projects. His first project was drawing maps for the Peralta Adobe, the only Adobe left standing throughout the entire valley. Ralph drew two maps: one of all the Santa Clara Adobes and their location in relation to the streets today, the second includes the Adobes, but it is filled with scenes that depict life in the early 1800's. Mr. Rambo is pleased with the preservation of the Peralta Adobe, but he wishes that efforts had been made earlier to save other historical buildings. More recently the Junior League of San Jose asked him to tape his biography for a unit course in Santa Clara's history to be used along with his books throughout county Junior High Schools. This forty minute tape covers his early life and then it answers questions that the Junior League anticipated students might ask.

When asked about Santa Clara Valley and its inhabitants, Mr. Rambo selected Sarah Winchester, Henry Miller and James Lick as the "Big Three" whose presence most benefited the valley. All three gave freely to charities and other philanthropic organizations. Ralph stated that Sarah Winchester never turned anyone down who asked for her help or contributions.

Is Ralph surprised about the changes that have occurred over the last seventy-five years? "Yes," but he says that he enjoys the present more than the past. His only comment is, "That one million people in a valley made for two or three Indian Tribes is too many!" When asked if he plans to write more books, he answers with a firm "No," but his enthusiasm for Santa Clara history will never wane. He conveys his enthusiasm and love for the Old Valley to anyone who reads his books.

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