

1992 Essay Contest

California Pioneers

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LITERARY FIGURES OF THE SANTA CLARA VALLEY

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INTRODUCTION

Think of conquering the West. What comes to mind? Prairie schooners loaded with pioneer belongings? John Fremont, the pathfinder, charting untraveled territories? Thousands of wealth-seekers searching for gold? Native Americans being forced from their land? The visions are endless.

But there was a gentler side of embracing the West. Many picked up their pens and recorded the western experience through the written word. Well-known writers such as Mark Twain, Bret Harte, Ina Coolbrith, Joaquin Miller, and Ambrose Bierce all settled into San Francisco at some point to write about the California experience.

But the Santa Clara Valley held a certain enchantment too. The writers chronicled on the following pages are but a select few that our valley can claim as their own. Others not included on these pages are W.C.Morrow, a San Jose Mercury reporter from 1881 to 1884, Sanborn Young and his wife, Ruth Comfort Mitchell, Charles Erskine Scott Wood and Sara Bard Field. Unfortunately, many diaries and words written about the West will never come to light, especially those recorded by the pioneer women who bravely left their comfortable homes to explore the unknown.

Today, the tradition continues. Our valley still produces exceptional writers such as Wallace Stegner and Al Young.

Hopefully, we will continue to conquer the West with the gentle art of words.

LITERARY FIGURES OF THE SANTA CLARA COUNTY

Writers have been lured by the romance of the Santa Clara County beginning with Fray Pedro Font, whose 1776 DeAnza expedition diary described the valley, to Pulitzer Prize winning Wallace Stegner, whose heroine in "Angle of Repose" wrote tales of the New Almaden Mine.

Well-known writers such as Jack London, Ambrose Bierce and Frank Norris were often valley visitors. Novelists such as Gertrude Atherton and Kathleen Norris, and poets Edwin Markham and Henry Meade Bland called the valley "home."

London frequently left his "Valley of the Moon" in Sonoma to visit the "Valley of the Heart's Delight" - Santa Clara Valley. One reason he travelled to the area was to visit the home of Santa Clara judge, Hiram Bond. Bond's two sons, Marshall and Louis, had become good friends with London in 1897 when the three young men were gold mining in the Yukon. The Bond Ranch, known as "New Park," was located at Benton Street and Lincoln Street. London immortalized the lovely estate in the opening chapter of "The Call of the Wild." One of Bond's dogs, Buck, became the main character in the 1903 best seller. The College Park train station, now

the site of Bellermine Preparatory School, is believed to be the site where Buck was railroaded to Alaska after being "dognapped." The Bond Ranch stood at the site of the Carmelite Monastery. The only remnant of the grand estate is the veranda, now affixed to the historic Jamison-Brown house at 1505 Warburton Avenue in Santa Clara.

Gertrude Atherton, daughter-in-law of mining hardware magnate Faxon Dean Atherton, wrote "Daughter of the Vine," an expose of an alcoholic neighbor, while living on the Atherton estate between El Camino Real and Valparaiso Avenue on the Menlo Park- Palo Alto border. It was the first of 56 novels she wrote before her death in 1948 at age 91.

As one of California's first liberated women, San Francisco-born Atherton scandalized prim and proper Peninsula society. Stephen Franklin, Atherton's doting maternal grandfather, and Gertrude, her beautiful but irresponsible mother, inked an indelible mark of self-will and determination on young Gertrude, setting a standard for her unorthodox behavior.

Her earliest childhood memories were of life on Rincon Hill. Her mother and father, Thomas Lodowick Horn, divorced after three years of marriage, and she and her mother moved 60 miles down the Peninsula to live on her grandfather's country ranch. Her autobiography, "Adventures of a Novelist," recalls the seemingly endless hours of ranch life. Her grandmother, a frail, "prematurely old" woman, knew the value of education and used the idle hours to

instill in young Gertrude a love of learning and books, although it was unfashionable at the time. Gertrude could read and spell by age 4.

Five years passed, and Gertrude gained a stepfather. John Fredrick Uhlhorn, a wealthy New Yorker, disliked the child intensely and referred to her as a "spoilt brat." The dislike was mutual. Blinded by the desire for happiness and a bulging bank account, the new Mrs. Uhlhorn viewed her precocious daughter as a stumbling block to her re-entry into San Francisco society. She sent her off to a small boarding house on Ellis Street.

Gertrude was subsequently enrolled in a string of boarding schools - and promptly dismissed. Performing somersaults in the classroom was not acceptable behavior for young ladies. She was sentenced to remain at home with nannies and nurses parading in and out the door at an alarming rate. None could care for the unmanageable urchin until her sister, Aleece, was born. Rose Stoddard, secured for a short time as a wet nurse, won young Gertrude's affection and interest with a hearty dose of stern discipline flavored with fun. What Stoddard expected to be a short stint stretched into 35 faithful years with the family.

Wealth brought with it a life of social frivolity in the Uhlhorn home. As Gertrude grew up, she mingled with the literary figures of the day such as Bret Harte and Mark Twain. But when misfortune struck the family (John Uhlhorn

was involved in a scandalous forgery and sent off to South America), Gertrude was sent to St. Mary's Hall, a boarding school in Benecia. Eventually she continued her education at Sayre Institute in Lexington, Kentucky.

Her mother attracted numerous suitors, one of the most eligible being George Atherton, son of wealthy taxon Dean Atherton. George planned to marry Gertrude's mother, although he was 14 years younger. But his attentions soon focused on 19-year-old Gertrude. When he proposed to young Gertrude, she replied "Oh well, I don't care. One has to marry sometime, I suppose."

Both families were horrified to find that George and Gertrude had married secretly with the blessing of the Rev. Varsi, a Jesuit. The Atherton home, located on 650 acres of Rancho de las Pulgas, was bought in 1860 from the widow of Luis Arguello, first Mexican governor of California. George and Gertrude took up residence, and the spacious home suddenly seemed too small to house free-spirited Gertrude and her straight-laced Chilean mother-in-law, Dominga Goni.

Much to Gertrude's dismay, her 5-foot, 200 pound mother-in-law monitored her activities. She was expected to join the verandah sewing and embroidery group because "intellect had no place in women" and "ladies in Spain do not write." Gertrude listened, but didn't subscribe. Twelve years later, she published her first book - a highly controversial novel about female alcoholism called "Daughter of the Vine."

A move to the uninhibited Milpitas Ranch, a 45,000-acre area 80 miles south of Monterey, and the birth of her two children- sickly George Jr. who died at 6 years old, and a daughter, Muriel- did nothing to help the mismatched marriage.

Eventually, Gertrude moved to San Francisco to pursue her literary career, and George sailed for his native Chile. Muriel was left in the care of her grandmother, Dominga Goni. In 1887, word was received of George's death, leaving widow Atherton with few tears and freedom. She became a world traveler, living and writing in New York, England, Germany, the West Indies, Greece and Alaska. By the early 1900's she yearned for California. Upon returning, she focused on writing local history. "California: An Intimate History" was written for the 1915 Panama-Pacific Exposition.

Her friendships were legendary. A bantering correspondence with cantankerous editor Ambrose Bierce and a 15-year relationship with civic leader and U.S. Senator James Phelan at Villa Montalvo in Saratoga caused tongues to wag far into the '20s.

Atherton remained active and productive until age 91. She died in San Francisco on June 14, 1948. Her fame and notoriety throughout Europe and the United States was mostly due to her opinions on controversial topics concerning women. Recently, scholar Emily Wortis Leider authored the most comprehensive work on Atherton. Published by Stanford

University Press, "California's Daughter" is a must read for valley history buffs.

A little more lucky in the marriage department were Palo Alto writers Kathleen and Charles "Cigi" Norris and Cupertino writers Fremont and Cora Baggerly Older.

Kathleen Thompson Norris (1880-1966) was the daughter of a San Francisco banker and president of the Bohemian Club. She was a society columnist for the San Francisco Examiner when she met Charles Gilman Norris (1881-1945), a writer for the new western magazine called "Sunset." They met at a lonely time in both their lives. She was nursing a broken heart caused by a broken engagement, and he was lamenting his stagnant writing career and smarting from the success of his deceased older brother's best seller, "The Octopus."

After they wed in 1909, they moved to New York for two reasons - to be where aspiring literati mingled, and to escape the elder Mrs. Norris who had accompanied them on their honeymoon. It didn't take long for Charles to realize the primary writing talent in the family belonged to his wife. Although he continued to write, he ultimately became both her most loyal fan and literary agent. Her prolific writings, mostly on the subject of women's lives, were published in the leading magazines of the day such as Women's Home Companion and American Magazine. Beginning in 1911, after the serialization of her novel, "Mother", she continued to produce two popular novels a year. Among the

most popular were "Family Gathering", "The Heart of Rachel", and "My California." But soon, Santa Clara Valley beckoned them back. Financial success allowed them to purchase a ranch in the Santa Cruz Mountains and a winter home in Palo Alto called Casa Abierta. The spanish-style home at 1247 Cowper Street in Palo Alto now serves as the Stanford University Newman Club.

The Norris' were involved with many pacifist causes such as America First, the antiwar organization group she headed with Charles Lindbergh. Kathleen was also active in the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom.

It was a common belief in social justice that brought Cora Baggerly, a gentle New Yorker, and Fremont Older, a rough and tumble Wisconsin editor, together. The Olders spent the early years of their marriage championing liberal causes such as prison reform and supporting labor unions while exposing graft and corruption on the pages of the San Francisco Bulletin. Their final years were spent at their 160-acre retreat, Woodhills, in the foothills of Cupertino.

The two met in 1893 when Older, then a reporter for the San Francisco Call, was in Sacramento covering the Legislature. Older, 37, was attending an amateur drama production at the home of a friend when Cora Baggerly, then an 18-year old Syracuse University student vacationing in Sacramento, caught his eye. From the whirlwind courtship and marriage three months later until her husband's death in 1935, Baggerly molded her life to fit that of Fremont Older.

A year after their marriage, the Call was sold and Older was named managing editor of the failing San Francisco Bulletin, a job marked by long hours, low pay and virtually no reporting staff. The Bulletin building was in disrepair. Evelyn Wells in her book "Fremont Older" described the substandard working conditions. Cobwebs, caved-in walls, yellowed files covered with dust and inadequate machinery all added to the dreary scene. But Cora brought a ray of sunshine into the darkened office. With youthful enthusiasm, she offered her inexperience to the dying newspaper. She received no salary but performed the work of many by writing everything from celebrity interviews to book and theatre reviews.

The untiring twosome lived at the Old California Hotel until Older's salary increased with the Bulletin's circulation. They were eventually able to rent a flat within walking distance of the paper. Later on, they would live at both the Palace Hotel and the Fairmont Hotel.

They lived in fear also. Fremont Older's sensational headlines and daring exposes agitated those who disagreed with his liberal leanings. Death threats were aimed at the antagonistic editor, particularly during his muckracking in early 1900s that led to the conviction of Mayor Eugene Schmitz and political boss Abraham Kuei.

Cora Older had no intention of being anything but an editor's wife. She staunchly supported his editorials and defended him against his detractors. She kept his house,

entertained his friends and fought his crusades by his side. In 1913, her patience was rewarded. They purchased 160 acres in the peninsula foothills above Cupertino. She oversaw the construction of the house located at 22800 Prospect Road, and designed the gardens - a far cry from the window box geraniums she nurtured while living in hotels.

Fremont Older continued to work in San Francisco, catching the train daily at Fremont Station at Stelling and Prospect Roads, while his wife basked in the beauty and serenity of country living. Lively conversation was always on the menu at the Older's frequent dinner parties. Dining partners often included a priest and a prostitute or a police chief and an ex-convict. The Older's circle of valley friends was wide, and all were equal in their eyes. Prisoners were often paroled in their care and worked on their property.

Fremont Older continued to commute 90 miles a day to San Francisco until his death on March 3, 1935, when he died peacefully being driven around the valley.

Cora Baggerly Older died in 1968 at the age of 93. She left a wealth of literary gems such as scrapbooks, notebooks and photo albums. They are all housed at the California Historical Society in San Francisco. She wrote "Love Stories of Old California," which was published in 1940. In 1971, portions of her daily journal - the original is housed at the Bancroft Library in Berkeley - were published by the

California History Center at DeAnza College under the title "The Diary of Cora Baggerly Older.

Today, Woodhills is a part of the Fremont Older Open Space Preserve, 734 acres owned and operated by the Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District. The house, listed on the National Register of Historic Places, has been restored and is leased to a family.

Living less colorful, but prolific literary lives, were poets Edwin Charles Markham (1852-1940), author of "The Man with a Hoe," and Henry Meade Bland (1863-1931), named post laureate of California by the state legislature in 1929.

Markham was born in the east bay in 1852. After graduation from the State Normal School in 1872 (now San Jose State University), he taught both in Coloma and the Evergreen area of San Jose. In 1879, he was elected county superintendent of education. Markham was 47 years old when he saw Millet's painting "The Man with a Hoe." When the San Francisco Examiner published his socialistic poem, he became an overnight sensation. Everyone from editor Ambrose Bierce to Collis Huntington had something to say about his famous poem. In 30 years, the poem earned Markham \$200,000 in reprints, and numerous speaking engagements. He was celebrated at the 1915 Panama-Pacific Exposition in the San Francisco when he presented his book "California the Wonderful."

Many have called his literary talents "meager", but there is no denying that his writings affected those in the

valley. His home at 432 S. Eighth Street in San Jose became somewhat of a shrine. Often called "Hoe Man House", the structure became the property of California State University Foundation. In 1987, it was moved to the San Jose Historical Museum complex in Kelley Park for all to enjoy.

For 30 years, Henry Meade Bland was a professor of creative English at the San Jose Teachers College. Along with Markham and Senator James Phelan, Bland established a literary Olympiad at Villa Montalvo, the Saratoga estate of Phelan. He was born in 1863 in Solano County and educated at various schools throughout the state. The family home was located in Linda Vista, east of San Jose at the foot of the Mount Hamilton Hills. In 1887, Bland was responsible for developing a "graduate" course in Los Gatos for young men and women who had completed grade school. The course prepared serious students for taking admission tests to attend Stanford, San Jose State Normal School, College of the Pacific and Santa Clara University. By April 1891, a petition was being circulated requesting that the "graduate" course become the first public high school curriculum. It wasn't until 1893 that voters overwhelmingly (102-0) elected to open Los Gatos High School. Henry Meade Bland was named principal.

Bland's works included "California, A Song of the Wild West and Other Poems", "A Day at Montalvo", and "A Day in the Hills." He died in April 1931.

while many have attempted to break into the literary circle of these early valley settlers, none have been as successful as Pulitzer Prize winning author Wallace Stegner. A resident of Los Altos Hills, Stegner has achieved literary prominence not only in his beloved west, but throughout the world. His list of impressive awards includes three U. Henry Awards, the Commonwealth Gold Medal for All the Little Live Things (1967), the Pulitzer Prize for Angle of Repose (1972), and the National Book Award for The Spectator Bird (1977). More recently the Los Angeles Times presented him with the Kirsch Award for Lifetime Literary Achievement, as did the P.E.N. Center USA WEST and the California Arts Council. His impressive teaching credentials include the University of Wisconsin, Harvard University and Stanford University, where he founded the Creative Writing Program. He retired from that position in 1971. He was twice a Guggenheim Fellow, was a Senior Fellow of the National Institute for the Humanities, and is a member of the National Institute and Academy of Arts and Letters and the National Academy of Arts and Sciences.

The bay area conservationists award him for his work as founder of Committee for Green Foothills and his involvement with Hidden Villa Ranch in Los Altos Hills.

His novels and short stories have made him a favorite among valley readers. His latest book, "Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs," is a tribute to writing in the west.

From mission padres to Stegner, Santa Clara Valley had been a magnet for talented writers. Our literary past is as much a part of who we are as our glorious apricot orchards and the innovative silicon chip.

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