

Our Town, My Town

A history of the town of Los Altos.



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Preface

"Good-by, Good-by, world. Good-by, Grover's Corners...Mama and Papa. Good-by to clocks ticking...and Mama's sunflowers. And food and coffee. And new ironed dresses and hot baths...and sleeping and waking up. Oh, earth, you're too wonderful for anybody to realize you. Do any human beings realize life while they live it?--every every minute?"

This is one of the more popular speeches given by the character of Emily Webb in the play *Our Town*. She delivers this speech after visiting an event from her past, just before returning to her grave. Thornton Wilder wrote the play *Our Town*, and in it he attempted to help people realize how remarkable life is, and how we should treasure it more. He portrays life in a small town in New Hampshire, called Grover's Corners. There are three acts in *Our Town*, each act centering on a significant part of life.

Before I go on, let me say that I am from a small town. I am afraid that, like most people, I do not live life to the fullest and enjoy it as much as I can. I think that I am the type of person to whom Thornton Wilder was trying to get through. I am from the town of Los Altos in California. Los Altos means The Heights. Although Los Altos is not actually located on very high land, its elevation being only slightly above sea level, it is surrounded by beautiful mountains reaching a thousand feet above

sea level and beyond. Los Altos is also very scenic. One might say that it is the height of beauty. I think that the events and setting of Grover's Corners in the play *Our Town*, are similar to those of Los Altos in its early stages, and that is the corollary I would like to draw in this paper.

The Golden Years

My town was founded in 1906. The original plan was for it to be a college town. It was already close to Stanford University and it was supposed to be the new home of Santa Clara College. Santa Clara University, then known as Santa Clara College, had planned on moving to the area where the Los Altos Golf and Country Club now stands, because that site offered more room for the college to expand. The college had acquired approximately 650 acres of land in that area. They had even begun to level off the ground so as to start building. However, the people who had promised to help pay for Santa Clara's new site were from San Francisco. In 1906 these people were not able to go through with their promise because they had to use all of their money to pay for the damage that the 1906 earthquake had caused them. Santa Clara College then decided to stay in its original location in Santa Clara, and later sold the land in Los Altos in 1923.

By 1906 the large, fertile area of the Santa Clara Valley that would become Los Altos had been sub-divided, and then farmed. There were hay and grain fields, a new crop for that area, and fruit and nut orchards were abundant. Although by this time it was known that Santa Clara College would not be a part of Los Altos, Stanford University was still nearby, and growing in

popularity. Its popularity caused great interest for people to come settle in its surrounding areas, and so the population in and around what is now Los Altos increased.

Many of the small sub-divisions were sold to Stanford professors who wanted to settle near their place of work. A large parcel of land, however, was acquired by a widow named Mrs. Winchester and her sister, Mrs. Merriman. The area of land which was owned by these two ladies was the general area of the town of Los Altos.

In 1906, an area of Mrs. Winchester's land was purchased by the Interurban Electrical Railway Company. It was purchased so that they would have a stop-off town on the route of the electric road which they planned to build from Palo Alto to Mountain View. Mrs. Winchester did not approve of the electric railway, but the company later bought her out.

At about the same time, the Southern Pacific Railway Company had purchased some land in Los Altos to build a steam powered railroad running from South Palo Alto (called Mayfield at the time) all the way to Santa Cruz. The train stopped in both Los Altos and Los Gatos. They thought that the Los Altos area offered a great foundation for a town to develop. This idea was first proposed by Paul Shoup, who had formed the Altos Land Company. He also held an authoritative position in the Southern

Pacific Railway Company. He felt that more people would move to the scenic area of Los Altos if it were to become a town, and that it would bring more business to the Railway Company.

Mr. Shoup and a group of friends laid out the townsite of Los Altos in 1907, advertising it as a lovely place to live because of its moderate climate, good transportation, and scenic appearance. Both the electric and steam powered railways were constructed. Because the Interurban Electrical Railway Company was a smaller division of the larger Southern Pacific Railway Company, the two ran smoothly, sharing the business from the Los Altos area. The first station in Los Altos simply consisted of two box cars. These were very plain, but were also just temporary. A permanent station was later built. Both the electric and steam powered railways offered a few free trips on their trains to entice people to visit, and hopefully settle in the area. By 1911 the town of Los Altos had quick and easy access to the entire Santa Clara Valley. Whether one preferred the steam line or the electric line, both ran at least twelve times a day through Los Altos.

After the transportation to Los Altos had been installed, the buildings, housing businesses, schools, and churches were constructed. A hardware store on Main Street was the first commercial business to locate itself in Los Altos in 1909. William F. Eschenbruecher was the owner and he had a dog that enjoyed basking in the sun on warm summer days in the middle of the street.

Luckily for him the amount of traffic running through Main Street at that time was minimal, and he usually sunbathed undisturbed. Mr. Eschenbruecher later became Los Altos' first postmaster.

Some buildings in downtown served many purposes. A good example of this would be the Shoup Building, named after previously mentioned Paul Shoup. It was a two-story building. The bottom story was used principally for a grocery store, while the upper story was the site of Boy Scout meetings, church meetings, and even school classes. Another building which housed a number of businesses was located on the corner of First and Main Streets. The Altos Land Company, The Los Altos Water Company, and the Los Altos Building and Loan Association were just a few of the businesses located in the building. Besides these specific buildings and businesses, the developing community of Los Altos had other necessary businesses in town such as a restaurant and a blacksmith.

The businesses of downtown Los Altos attracted even more people to settle in the area and residential houses became common. This is the reason why by 1911, Los Altos' first real school was built. It was named San Antonio School and was found at the corner of San Antonio and Main Streets. To give you an idea of real estate value in those days, lots in Los Altos measuring fifty feet by one hundred and forty two feet were sold for four hundred to six hundred and fifty dollars. Each lot also came with an alley behind it for utilities which would be needed

in the house. That is nothing compared to the sky high prices of real estate in this area today. Of course, the premiere lots which had a view of a creek or such were offered at a slightly higher price, and the people who purchased those lots must have been the wealthy ones of their day.

Just like today, there were crafty men in the early 1900's who were out to swindle the money out of the common men through deals that seemed too good to be true, and that's exactly what they were. It turns out that a company offered a contest or drawing, so to speak, at a theater in San Francisco. To try and make money and also to bring more people to Los Altos, this company had special "dish nights". On these nights the company offered either a free set of dishes or a free lot in Los Altos to the person who was holding the correct ticket at the theater. Of course, the majority of the winners chose the lot. At first the people thought this was a generous thing to do. However their attitudes quickly shifted. The lucky winners of the drawings traveled to Los Altos to see their new land and when they reached it, they found it to be quite small. To build anything they were forced to buy the larger adjacent lot at a very expensive price.

Many other services, clubs, and businesses, originated in Los Altos from the years 1908 to about 1924. These things made Los Altos seem more like a town as we know it by today's standards. In 1908 Los Altos received its first regular telephone services. Between 1910 and 1914, many religious groups, includ-

ing the Episcopalians and the Christian Scientists, began regular meetings in Los Altos. The first Los Altos Library opened on Main Street in the office of the Altos Land Company in 1915. It began with a mere one hundred books. It has since relocated several times. Around this same time the *Los Altos Star*, a newspaper, began printing, and informing the residents of Los Altos of the local events. The subscription rate for a year's worth of newspapers was only one dollar. Another very important service to mention was the origination of the Fire Department in Los Altos. In 1922, the first group of Los Altos citizens banded together to fight fires. The group was headed by Thomas Woodworth. The group was formed because of the increasing number of fires starting in the area from dry orchards and fields. Previous fires had been put out by the owner of the land the fire was on, and his or her friends or neighbors.

As was previously mentioned, but to keep events in chronological order, Santa Clara College, after finding out in 1906 that it was not going to transfer to a new campus, still kept the 620 acre parcel of land, maintaining it until the year 1923. At that time they sold the a large portion of it to the Los Altos Golf and Country Club which began work on the golf course right away. To be a member of the club, however, cost the people of that time a great deal, around five hundred dollars to be exact.

From the birth of the town of Los Altos in 1906, to about the year 1930, was the time period called the Golden Age by some of Los Altos' early residents, who continued to reside in the town for a matter of years after that. The fertile Santa Clara Valley was home to many farmers, and so was Los Altos. Back then, almost every home was separated by a rather large farm or ranch in-between. Open space was in abundance, quite a difference from today's densely populated areas.

I have just described the birth of a typical, small, American town in the early years of the twentieth century. This town happened to be my town, Los Altos. However, just by changing a few of the names, I think that it could have very well been the setting for Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*. Grover's Corners was also a small town in the early 1900's, most likely a fictional one. Although few facts were actually given about the town's history, what was said bore a resemblance to that of Los Altos.

It is mentioned in the opening speech of the Stage Manager, who acts as the narrator of the play, that there are both railroad tracks running through Grover's Corners, and that there is also a train station in town. An interesting fact indeed, considering Los Altos came to be because of the railroad. Grover's Corners was a rural area, and although we do not know if it was a farming community, several scenes are placed in either the flower or vegetable gardens of the residents. The important positions of the town were those held by the doctor, the editor of the town

newspaper, and the banker. Rather than the *Los Altos Star*, headed by H. G. Copeland, Grover's Corner's newspaper was titled the *Sentinel* and headed by one of the main characters, Mr. Webb.

Even very trivial, yet amusing details appear the same in the two towns. As was mentioned earlier, Mr. Eschenbruecher, the owner of the first Los Altos Hardware Store, had a dog who enjoyed passing the time napping in the street. In Grover's Corners, the owner of the drugstore, a minor part played by the stage manager, had a dog who did the same exact thing. That's hard to believe considering you can barely cross the street today without getting in the way of several cars.

I realize that the play *Our Town* was written more on the events of human life than the actual town of Grover's Corners, and that the play is performed with minimal scenery so as to let your imagination fill in the blanks about the town. However, I think that Thornton Wilder created it that way to have Grover's Corners represent the typical, rural American town, and I think that it was a job well done.

The Recent Past

One could say that in its early, or golden years, Los Altos was like an infant developing into a child. Its population in 1917 was a mere sixty people. Then in the years after 1930, it continued to slowly grow and mature. During the 1940's, however, it seems as if Los Altos hit adolescence, in which rapid growth and expansion took place. By 1949 Los Altos was the home of at least ten thousand people. The Second World War caused the urbanization of the Bay Area to intensify and Los Altos' population increased rapidly until in 1952, Los Altos reached adulthood. In December of 1952, Los Altos was incorporated as the eleventh city in Santa Clara County.

Although most humans stop growing once they reach adulthood, Los Altos continued to grow, and even today it is expanding. Its current population is estimated around twenty seven thousand. From its small beginnings, Los Altos' population, businesses, and services have grown slowly but steadily to what they are today. There is not as much to say about the period of time between the Golden Age and the present. However, there have been several changes.

One major change was the railroad. The trains, which were the reason for Los Altos' foundation, have since stopped. The electric line ran until 1933, when it was forced to close because of a lack of business. The automobile had become more and more

popular until it replaced the train as the most used type of transportation in Los Altos. The steam line lasted until 1958, when it, too, had to stop its services for the same reason. It stuck it out longer than the electric line because it was of more use to Los Altans, running to more locations in the valley. The railroad tracks were paved over and today are Foothill Expressway. The permanent train station that had been built at First Street was transformed first into a restaurant, a burger stand to be exact, and later into a savings and loan.

Another change was in Los Altos' newspaper. Los Altos' first newspaper, the *Los Altos Star*, only lasted a few years. In 1947, another newspaper, reporting mainly the news of the town itself and the local areas, was founded. This paper was called the *Town Crier*. The *Town Crier* has been a successful newspaper, and it still is printed today.

Los Altos has also gained a police force. It was founded in 1953 by a group of four law abiding citizens who wished to keep the laws of Los Altos enforced. The group of four was headed by a man named Joseph McClelland. There was one minor problem with this police force, though. It only had one police car, which was not very well equipped. The car did not have a siren or a telephone. If one of the policemen was in need of more enforcement, it was his job to find the nearest pay phone and call for it. Also, since the police force was so small, each of the men had to switch off working very long shifts. Today, it

is nice to know that the Los Altos police force is about ten times larger than it was when it began in 1953. One will often pass a police car on the road in Los Altos, as there are more than one now, and these police cars are fully equipped.

A business, or rather a service, which has tremendously changed in the way of expanding is the Los Altos Library. As was mentioned before, it began in 1914, with only one hundred books. The change in the amount of books circulated is enough to make one realize how much the library has expanded. In 1922 the library was reported as having five hundred books in circulation. In 1933 there were three thousand three hundred books and in 1961 the library had over twenty one thousand books in circulation. Today the Los Altos Library is located off San Antonio Road in downtown Los Altos. It has grown from one hundred books to one hundred and one thousand books plus a great number of magazines, newspapers, cassettes, records, and videotapes. Copiers, printers, and computers are also there. An index of all the books in the library is in the computers there for easy location of any book by author, subject or title. If you can't find it in the computer, a member of the library's staff will be sure to help you. It also houses an exhibit on the Ohlone Indians, some of the first settlers in this area. The Los Altos Library is certainly well equipped for you to locate the information you need quickly and easily.

The Present

Today, Los Altos is known for its many shops and boutiques, rather than the fact that it used to be a stop on the route of two railroads. Most of the orchards that used to fill the Santa Clara Valley have been sub-divided and developed. The price of real estate in Los Altos has skyrocketed from the original four hundred and fifty dollar lots. Developers have taken advantage of this, and hardly any space is left undeveloped. It is not uncommon nowadays to see a lot with a fairly large home on it sell for half a million to a million dollars.

Los Altos is now the home of more than two hundred businesses in the downtown area alone. That number is growing steadily, also, as new structures are continually being built to house even more businesses. An example of that would be the recently completed buildings on the corner of First and State Streets, which used to be the site of an empty lot full of weeds. They now shelter a T-shirt shop, chocolate shop, bicycle shop, and several other stores. Los Altos is often compared to Carmel, California, which is also a small town that draws people in because of its many quaint shops. Most of them are expensive, too.

Most people probably do not even know of Los Altos' origin as a proposed college town, or as a town on the route of two railroads, unless they are members of Mercury Savings which locates

itself inside the old train depot. The bank has converted and remodeled the depot so that the front of the building faces First Street, rather than the Foothill Expressway. A plaque marking this historical monument stands outside the bank, and a few old pictures are hung inside.

Another historic building which still stands in the center of downtown Los Altos is the Shoup Building, which used to serve many purposes, and even was the site where the children who were residents of Los Altos attended their first classes. Like the old Los Altos train depot, the Shoup Building is today occupied by a bank. It also has a plaque identifying it as the Shoup Building outside, as well as some pictures of Los Altos from its beginning to its recent past hanging on the wall inside.

Paul Shoup, who could be called the founder of Los Altos, for it was his idea originally to have a train station in this area of natural beauty, is remembered in Los Altos today by more than just the Shoup Building on Main Street. In 1909, Paul and his brothers had established a residence for their mother on University Avenue. The area behind the house extended down a hill and at the bottom there was a creek. Originally this lot with the creek running through it was an area that was available for all of the nearby residents to use. However, in 1955 that lot became Los Altos' first city park, and was named Shoup Park. It is still a park today and is a peaceful setting to enjoy a picnic, and a way for Los Altos to remember Paul Shoup.

The Future

Who knows what is held in store for the future of Los Altos? Will it continue to prosper as it has in the past and the present? Will real estate prices continue to increase at the rate that they have in the past few years? Will another earthquake, possibly larger than the 1906 earthquake, change Los Altos in a permanent way? No one knows exactly what will happen. I, as well as most Los Altans, hope that it will continue to prosper. I also hope that Los Altos will not lose its natural beauty, that the few open spaces we have will be preserved and protected for future generations. The recent earthquake in October of 1989 surely rattled the nerves of all who experienced it, but luckily didn't change Los Altos much. As for the price of Los Altos real estate, since it has been rising so quickly for the past few years, it seems as though it should top out or drop in price, although that has yet to be the case. As for my paralleling of Grover's Corners, New Hampshire, and Los Altos, California, Thornton Wilder described that town in the early 1900's. Who knows what it would be like today? I think that it might not be as developed and crowded as Los Altos, because the population of New Hampshire is not quite that of California. The railroad might have prospered in Grover's Corners, unlike in Los Altos. Then again, it might have been replaced by highways carrying automobiles in Grover's Corners also. Since there is no descrip-

tion of the town beyond that of the early 1900's, I just have to use my imagination in thinking what might have become of that town, just as I have to in thinking what will become of my town in the future. *Our Town's* Grover's Corners and my town, Los Altos, typical small American towns.

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