

**SPLENDID ISOLATION:**  
**A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE CITY OF WILLOW GLEN**  
**1927-1936**

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## PREFACE

Today, Willow Glen is a residential community nestled in the heart of the City of San Jose, California. In Willow Glen there exists a strong sense of community and autonomy. I believe the district's identity can be traced to the fact that between 1927 and 1936 Willow Glen was a city.

This essay examines, and is dedicated to, a small group of Willow Glenites who struggled against the forces of urbanization and fought to protect their community, both for themselves and posterity.

I began work on this essay in the Spring of 1993 under the supervision of Dr. Ramon Chacon at Santa Clara University.

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## THE WILLOWS

On the streets, in the schools, in the businesses, and in the homes of Willow Glen there exists a distinct sense of community. There has always been a special pride when citizens explain that they reside in Willow Glen. The recognition of this special community can be traced to a time in the early 1900s when citizens of Willow Glen attempted to protect their homeland from the evils of industrialization-- a time when Willow Glen was its own city. The formation of the City of Willow Glen and its history can be best understood as a struggle between citizens desiring to protect their peaceful residential community and others desiring to develop a prosperous industrial district.

The Willow Glen area, also known as The Willows, is a region nestled between the Quadalupe River and Los Gatos Creek in the central of the Santa Clara Valley. In the early 1900s, Willow Glen gained notoriety as the fastest growing residential community of the Valley and one of San Jose's first suburbs. The area's geography and environment attracted many settlers. Its proximity to the City of San Jose provided Willow Glen residents with the conveniences and culture of the cosmopolitan Downtown area without the crowding and confusion of urban life. Also, the unique climate and the richness of the soil combined to make Willow Glen an attractive residential community. An elevation of 60 to 75 feet above Downtown San Jose has tended to give Willow Glen a slightly more temperate climate than other parts of the Valley and

eliminates much of the fog. And what was at one time an area of swampy marsh land provided Willow Glen with rich, fertile soil.<sup>1</sup>

## THE CITY OF WILLOW GLEN: THE FIRST ATTEMPT

Willow Glenites established a unique identity in the community. From the 1800s through the 1900s, Willow Glen remained outside of the city limits of San Jose and prospered as an unincorporated area of Santa Clara County.<sup>2</sup> In the early 1900s Willow Glen began its transformation from an agricultural community to a residential community.<sup>3</sup> Residents of Willow Glen quickly developed a keen sense of community and an intense desire for its continuance. The first move by the citizens of Willow Glen towards protecting their community can be traced to the fall of 1917. On November 12, 1917 the Willows Improvement Committee presented the Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors a petition signed by the residents of the Willows to order an election on the matter of incorporating into a city.<sup>4</sup>

The major issue that inspired the petition was the fact that

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<sup>1</sup>"Retention of Willow Glen Growth Aim of Residents," San Jose Mercury Herald, 13 January 1929.

<sup>2</sup>As a point of clarification, areas that lay outside of city limits are considered unincorporated areas of the county. An area that is its own city is, therefore, referred to as an incorporated area.

<sup>3</sup>Elizabeth Giarratana, Old Willow Glen (Sunnyvale: Consolidation Publications, 1977), 23-34.

<sup>4</sup>"Supervisors Grant Willow Glen Request." SJMH November 13, 1917.

the old franchise of the Southern Pacific had almost expired and a new franchise had not yet been granted. In addition, the Western Pacific had not yet built its line to San Jose.<sup>5</sup> The law of California states that no right to run a railroad shall be granted in an incorporated city without the consent of two-thirds of the city council.<sup>6</sup> Some members of the Willows viewed this as a "golden opportunity" to require both railways to unite in its workings while still meeting traffic demands and minimizing property damage.<sup>7</sup>

The Board of Supervisors approved the petition and ordered an election to be held on November 30 at the Willow Glen School. The issues of incorporation quickly became a highly debated issue. On November 21, a gathering of 350 people crowded into the Willow Glen schoolhouse to nominate trustees and discuss the issues of incorporation. The meeting was called to order by Paul F. Clark, president of the Willow Glen Improvement Club. Previous to the meeting, Clark had been wrongfully accused of being employed by the Southern Pacific and seeking personal gain from incorporation. Clark attempted to clearup the controversy by making this opening statement:

"My only interest in this question is one of community interest. With me it is strictly what is best for the

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<sup>5</sup>"Willow Glen People Explain Intentions." SJMH November 23, 1917.

<sup>6</sup>"Say Corporation Would Control R.R." SJMH 7 September 1927.

<sup>7</sup>SJMH November 23, 1917.

community. I have taken what action I have because I believe it to be right. I started the incorporation petition because I, as president of the Improvement Club, was asked to do so by a number of the people of the community."

Also present at the meeting was T.S. Montgomery, director and local representative of the Western Pacific. Somewhat frustrated with the entire process, Montgomery lashed out:

"If you will just let up on this incorporation until the Western Pacific hurts you you will then have a grievance instead of grouch. The railroad has its right-of-way from the railroad commission and it's coming through. We do not think you can stop it!"<sup>8</sup>

This was the beginning of a heated exchange of views. The major forum for such discussions was the pages of the San Jose Mercury Herald, which adamantly opposed incorporation for the Willows. The newspaper and other opponents of incorporation pointed to the economic development that the railroad would provide to the growing Valley and the substantial growth that would benefit the businesses and residents of San Jose, and especially Willow Glen.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, those who supported incorporation pointed to a lack of control over industries that would come into the area

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<sup>8</sup>"Willow Glen Divided Over Incorporation." SJMH November 21, 1917, 7.

<sup>9</sup>"Willows Incorporation." (Editorial) SJMH 23 November 1917, 6; "Willow Glen People Explain Intentions." SJMH 23 November 1917, 7.

decreasing land values and the general desirability of the Willow Glen community.<sup>10</sup>

On November 30, the voters of Willow Glen headed to the polls at the schoolhouse to decide the incorporation question. By a margin of 273 to 155, the voters of Willow Glen defeated the campaign for incorporation.<sup>11</sup> The Willows remained an unincorporated area of the county. However, a decade later Willow Glen found itself engulfed in the incorporation date once again.

## THE CITY OF WILLOW GLEN: THE SECOND ATTEMPT

On July 22, 1927, the Southern Pacific, in conjunction with the San Jose City Council and City Manager, announced a plan for the removal of the Fourth Street railway station and tracks and the re-routing of a new railway. The new route would run from downtown San Jose, along the Alameda, across Los Gatos Creek, around the Palm Haven district and across Willow Street through the Willow Glen district.<sup>12</sup>

In response, eleven days later attorney L.D. Bohnett provided the Santa Clara Board of Supervisors a petition signed by 160 Willows residents requesting a special election for incorporation. After a long discussion of the issue, which included Southern

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<sup>10</sup>"Willow Glen People Explain Intentions." SJMH 23 November 1917, 7.

<sup>11</sup>"Vote Beats Plan For Town." SJMH 1 December 1917, 1.

<sup>12</sup>"City and S.P. Agree on Rail Routing, Cost Apportionment." 23 July 1927, 1.

Pacific attorney William James and San Jose City Attorney Archer Bowden pleading the Board for delays, the County Supervisors unanimously voted to grant the election. The Board established September 8, 1927, as the date for the election.<sup>13</sup>

For the next month, the residents of Willow Glen once again became the battle ground of political debate. The opponents of incorporation continued to stress the economic necessity of the railway. Some residents of Willow Glen pointed to the beneficial conveniences of the railroad. Investors saw the development opportunities and increased land values from the railroad as a great asset to the economy of the Valley, Willow Glen, and themselves.

The opponents also found an influential companion in the Mercury Herald. Once again, the Valley's most influential newspaper immediately denounced the campaign for incorporation. The newspaper focused on the railroad's contributions to the development of San Jose. It stated that the incorporation campaign could jeopardize the building of the main line between San Francisco and Los Angeles running through San Jose. Instead, the Mercury contended, the SP could use a line that went through Los Gatos.<sup>14</sup>

The major supporters of incorporation came from long-time residents of the Willows and surrounding areas. Joe Hageman was Chairman of the Save the Willows campaign, the organization which

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<sup>13</sup>"Willows to Take Vote; Phelan Gift Is Rejected." SJMH 2 August 1927, 1.

<sup>14</sup>"The Willow Glen Incorporation." (Editorial) SJMH 2 August 1927, 6; "Willow Glen and the Railroad." (Editorial) SJMH.

inspired and led the battle for incorporation. Paul F. Clark, leader of the unsuccessful 1917 campaign, also took an instrumental role in the 1927 movement. And once again, L.D. Bohnett provided legal representation for the incorporationists, as he had 1917. Their inspiration for the incorporation movement focused on the destruction that would result from a railroad being built through their peaceful community.

Because of vital experience gained from the defeat in 1917, the supporters of incorporation built a strong campaign. Due to the opposition of the Mercury, the incorporationists sought other means in which to express their views. One tactic used by the Save the Willows Committee was the placement of wrecked automobiles at strategic intersections of the Western Pacific tracks in the Willows district. Attached to the autos were signs informing passerbys that sixteen people had been killed at grade crossings in the Santa Clara County since the first of the year.<sup>15</sup>

On September 8, 1927, Willow Glen residents headed to the voting booths in record numbers and approved incorporation 686 to 364. With nearly a two to one margin, the City of Willow Glen was on its way to official existence. Also, on the ballot residents were to chose a treasurer, clerk, and trustees (city council). C.J. Clark was elected treasurer and Dana H. Thomas was elected clerk. Paul F. Clark, Joe Hageman, R.A. Whiffen, A.R. Webster, and L.C. Rossi were elected the 5 trustees, with Clark later being appointed

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<sup>15</sup>"Wreck Explained By Willows Group." SJMH 26 August 1927, 15.

to mayor.<sup>16</sup>

## THE RISE AND FALL OF THE CITY

Along with a city came the need to provide services that sufficed the needs of the citizens. Within a few days of the election, Mrs. L.C. Minnie wrote an editorial to the Willow Glen city officials via the editorial pages of the Mercury Herald. She wrote: "I would like to call your attention to the condition of the creek bed and road on Coe Avenue near Lincoln. The road, which is sinking and the bank, which is caving, require immediate attention." So even before officials could be sworn in, the residents of Willow Glen were testing the effectiveness of the new city.<sup>17</sup>

And just as city officials were getting comfortable with their seats, they confronted an even greater challenge to their authority. On September 13, 1927, shortly following the election, Paul Shoup, executive vice president of the Southern Pacific Railroad Company wrote a lengthy letter to Dan W. Gray, president of the San Jose City Council. In the letter, Shoup reviewed the plan previously announced on July 22, the stimulus of the Willow Glen's incorporation movement. The next day, the Mercury explained that San Jose officials quickly noted absolutely no mention of the

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<sup>16</sup>"Willow Glen To Be City Tuesday." SJMH, 10 September 1927, 13.

<sup>17</sup>"Work Awaits New City Officials." (Editorial) SJMH, 16 September 1927, 5.

City of Willow Glen or even an inference to the recent election in the letter from Shoup. Officials from San Jose and Willow Glen were at a loss to explain the neglect.<sup>18</sup>

Furthermore, the railroad proceeded on an intentional defiance of the city's authority. On December 18, 1927 and two months later on February 14, 1928, the Southern Pacific began to lay tracks through a small portion of the Willow Glen through which its amended right-of-way ran. City officials immediately sought an injunction charging that the railroad did not ask for a franchise. The SP replied that it did not need one. This began a lengthy battle that would eventually find its way to the U.S. Supreme Court, with the City of Willow Glen prevailing.<sup>19</sup>

Despite the direct challenges by the SP, the officials of Willow Glen were in the midst of building a city. By 1928, the City of Willow Glen was well on its way to establishing itself as a strong, well-managed municipality. With regard to population, Willow Glen challenged Santa Clara as the county's third largest city, only smaller than San Jose and Palo Alto, but larger than Los Gatos, Gilroy, and Mountain View.<sup>20</sup>

By 1930, city officials were able to provide the services of a major city. The city had organized a fire and police department,

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<sup>18</sup>"Silent on Willows, S.P. Resumes Parley With City on Tracks." SJMH, 13 September 1927, 1.

<sup>19</sup>"Petitions to Disincorporate Willow Glen Are Circulated." SJMH, 17 May 1929; Clyde Arbuckle, Clyde Arbuckle's History of San Jose (San Jose: Memorabilia of San Jose, 1986), 62.

<sup>20</sup>G.B. McMurry. "The County Viewpoint." SJMH 29 November 1928.

funded improvements in several streets and the laying of sidewalks, and increased the number of street lights by 35 percent. In addition, the police department reported a third less accidents since incorporation, even with increased traffic. Also, insurance rates were reduced in most cases by one-third, and in many instances by one-half. On the cities third anniversary the Mercury Herald described Willow Glen as follows:

"More and more civic pride has been aroused. Residents see their city's name in the news reports, they find remarkable growth recorded in financial journals in amount of building permits issued, and they note the records of State Controller Riley that its tax rate of 79 cents was the lowest rate last year of any one of the cities of its size."<sup>21</sup>

By 1933, city officials had developed a rather complex and effective government. In addition to the elected city clerk, treasurer, 5 city council positions (including a mayor), Willow Glen also possessed a chief of police, fire chief, city engineer, superintendent of streets, building inspector, and city attorney. All this was provided with a minimal budget and continually low taxes.<sup>22</sup>

For close to a decade low taxes and a peaceful residential community attracted families to Willow Glen. Throughout this

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<sup>21</sup>"Third Birthday of Willow Glen is Celebrated." SJMH, 14 September 1930.

<sup>22</sup>"Puterbaugh Is Elected Mayor of Willow Glen." SJMH, 11 July 1933.

period, there was a group of residents who disapproved of the sovereignty of Willow Glen and pushed for a merger with the City of San Jose. In May of 1929 and September of 1931 elections for disincorporation were held, but both were defeated. But in 1936, the campaign for consolidation with San Jose was once again renewed.

In the summer of 1936, the need for an expanded sewer system confronted the officials of Willow Glen. On July 20, the Willow Glen City Council established an election to be held on August 21 to vote on whether Willow Glen would assume its \$56,000 share of the \$250,000 WPA sewer connection project with San Jose's sewer system, and September 4 to vote on whether Willow Glen should merge with San Jose.

By voting for its share of the \$250,000 sewer project prior to consolidating, Willow Glen would work with the San Jose in joint expansion of the sewer system. In the event the bond election lost but consolidation won, Willow Glen's share would have to be met with by the creation of a special assessment district. On the other hand, if the bond election carried and consolidation lost, Willow Glen could alone apply for the \$250,000 WPA grant, but would be forced to put up not only \$56,000 cash, but thousands in additional engineering and attorney's costs-- besides having to pay San Jose approximately \$2500 annually for connecting to San Jose's sewer system.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>"Willow Glen to Vote on Merger With S.J. Sept. 4." SJMH, 21 July 1936.

On August 21, 1936, citizens of Willow Glen headed to the polls to vote on approval of the \$56,000 bond for the sewer system. With a vote of 776 to 539, a majority of the residents approved the bond, but the vote failed to carry the necessary two-thirds majority by less than 100 votes.

On September 4, residents once again headed to the polls, this time to vote on the merger issue. The final tabulations showed that 928 voted in favor of mergering with San Jose and 871 against. By a margin of 57 votes, 3 percent of the total vote, the City of Willow Glen was issued its termination. After nearly a decade of sovereignty and holding out through two other consolidation elections, Willow Glen residents could no longer resist the needs of development. A well-organized consolidation movement, the sewer issue, and the support of a "sympathetic" Mercury Herald were too much for the Willow Glenites to withstand.<sup>24</sup>

The merger of Willow Glen and San Jose marked the end of a special era. Willow Glen's action brought about 7000 new residents into San Jose, increasing its population to nearly 75,000. It was the eleventh adjacent area to join San Jose since 1911. (The next merger of two California cities would not come until 1964.<sup>25</sup>)

For nearly a decade, Willow Glen residents lived in "splendid isolation." A group of citizens took it upon themselves to protect a community from the perils of industrialization. A visionary group

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<sup>24</sup>"Willow Glen Votes S.J. Consolidation By Narrow Margin." SJMH, 5 September 1936, 1.

<sup>25</sup>"A Merger to Remember." SJM, 20 August 1964.

of residents became dedicated to the need of protecting their unique community and ensuring its continuance. The Founding Fathers of Willow Glen constructed an effective city for nine years. But the struggle for autonomy and the battle against development came to an end in the Fall of 1936. Citizens made a lasting effort to protect the residential community from becoming another overcrowded, decayed urban city. But in the end, the seasons of change prevailed. Willow Glenites postponed but could not overcome the inevitability of change.

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