

QUARTERLY BULLETIN  
OF THE CALIFORNIA PIONEERS  
OF SANTA CLARA COUNTY  
INCORPORATED 1875

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## THE FIRST CORNISH MINERS AT NEW ALMADEN

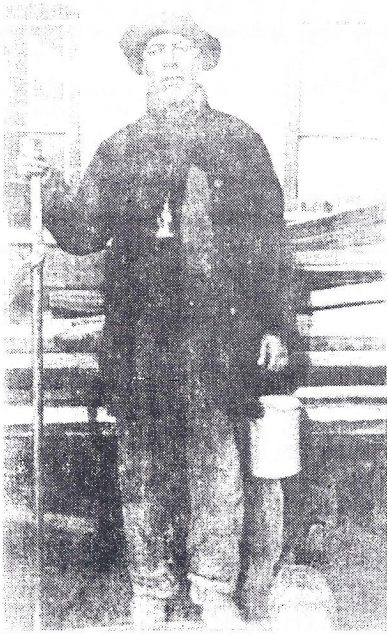
*By Gage McKinney*

(Editor's note: Gage McKinney's essay, "The First Cornish Miners at New Almaden," won first prize in the Pioneers' Essay Contest in 1991. The 66-page essay is summarized in two parts beginning below and continuing in the next edition of THE TRAILBLAZER.)

If you visit Cornwall, England's most southwestern country, you can hike up to Carn Brea, a granite medieval castle that perches on a 600-foot hill. From that modest vantage point you can look out over the rolling countryside where Cornish people dug for tin and copper for a thousand years, and on slopes that today are given over to pasture you can see the old brick pump houses of the long-closed mines. To the north on a clear day you might see the Celtic sea breaking near the bluffs; and to the south, where you can't see because of a line of wooded hills, is the picturesque city of Falmouth, the port of embarkation for so many of the hard-rock miners who left England behind when they sailed for America. How small Carn Brea Hill must have seemed in the memory of the first Cornishmen who came to the Santa Clara Valley and lifted up their eyes to the 3800-foot peak of Loma Prieta.

I wrote my essay because I had a story to tell about these people who came from Cornwall to Santa Clara County to work in the mines at a time when quicksilver (mercury) was an essential ingredient in the amalgamation of precious metals, including gold. The published literature on New Almaden emphasizes the Cornish miners who came after an American company took control of the mines in 1864, and especially after the arrival of James Randol, the very capable manager who directed the operation during its most prominent years in the 1870s and 80s. But what interested me were the miners who

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*A Mexican miner who has adopted the traditional lunch pail used by Cornish miners.*

(Photo courtesy of the New Almaden Museum)

came years before that, during the Anglo-Mexican period (about 1847 to 1863) when the mines were controlled by capitalists from Britain and Mexico. I had two reasons for believing that Cornish miners played a role at New Almaden much earlier than most everyone had suspected: first, because in reading Dr. A. Cecil Todd's book about Mexico, The Search for Silver, I learned that Cornishmen played an important role in the silver mines near Mexico City beginning in the 1820s; and second, because by grandfather used to tell my brother and me that we had Cornish ancestors at New Almaden in the mid-1850's.

What is special about the Cornish is something more than the fact that they represent an English county that is roughly the same size as Santa Clara County, or that they brought with them recipes for pasties and clotted cream, or that their culture shows a particular keenness for male choirs and brass bands. What the Cornish represented was "technology". They were simply the most sophisticated miners in the world, having solved all the practical problems of blasting, timbering, hoisting, flooding and ventilating mine shafts generations before they came to California. They were also the people who developed the most efficient steam engines and who applied them to mines, as well as to railroads and even horseless carriages. What the integrated circuit is to our day, the steam engine was to theirs, and they brought their Cornish engines to all the mining districts of the United States, Mexico and the rest of the world.

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The first account of Cornishmen at New Almaden comes from late 1847 or 1848. The original Mexican owners of the quicksilver mine, including its discoverer, Mexican Army Captain Andres Castillero, sold controlling interest to the British firm of Barron Forbes, and Company in Tepic, Mexico, after war broke out between Mexico and the United States in 1846. A naval officer in California reported that in the following year Alexander Forbes, the active partner in the firm, brought Cornish miners from an unproductive silver mine in Mexico to work the quicksilver diggings near San Jose. From that same period there is a book of employees' accounts from the company store in New Almaden, showing the names of several dozen Anglos--probably including some Cornishmen--who worked at the mine; and who all left, slipping away a few at a time, after gold was discovered in 1848 in the raceway of a sawmill that John Sutter was erecting at Coloma.

From 1849 through the early '50s the Cornish in California were concentrated near the gold diggings of the Sierra foothills, leaving the work at the quicksilver mines entirely to Mexican miners, who were persecuted, chased from their claims and generally unwelcomed in the Gold Rush. By 1854, though, Cornish people were back, laying a rail track of 4-foot gauge into the main tunnel at New Almaden. Among those who arrived in the 1850s were William Grey (who eventually became superintendent of the mine) and his two brothers: several brothers named Pearce; and my ancestors, the four Hicks brothers from Redruth, in the the heart of the Cornish mining country. In all there were at least 40--and perhaps as many as 100--Cornishmen at the quicksilver mine before 1860. (*Next issue: Mine Hill in the Anglo-Mexican Period*).

Gage McKinney, brother of former Pioneers' president David McKinney, grew up in the Willow Glen area of San Jose and now lives and works in Sunnyvale. His essay, "Yankee Sea Captains on the California Coast: the Life of John Gage," appeared in a recent issue of The Californians magazine. He is continuing to research the social history of California's quicksilver mining settlements.





## President's Message

Ruth Patton

When it was time to prepare a President's message for this issue I found myself somewhat overwhelmed by a personal problem, so I asked for help from the Board of Directors. I found the following contributions most interesting. I think you will too.

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*From: Jane Brownton, Corresponding Secretary*

Being that I am a native San Josean having been born on Hawthorne Way (the little frame house is still there), having spent my first ten years here, returning in 1932 to attend San Jose State, marrying Leighton P. Brownton in 1936 at Trinity Episcopal (now Cathedral), and residing here ever since, my roots necessarily go deep. I so enjoy my membership in the California Pioneers of Santa Clara County, and serving on the Board of Directors for many reasons.

Friendship, travels with Barbara Johnsen, continuing interest in the history and progress of our area, knowledge, education, happy and fun times -- all with people I have met here and enjoy so much.

Our Board is made up of dedicated, hard-working members who deserve much credit for their efforts and accomplishments. And, we have a lot of laughs along the way!

Please volunteer to serve and to work with us. I think you will be pleasantly surprised.

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*From: Leah Warren, Sunshine Chairperson*

As Sunshine Chairman, I strongly believe it's important that a continuing communication be made with our membership for those recovering from illness or who have suffered the loss of a family member.

Success in these endeavors can be achieved only through conscientious effort on the part of members to keep me informed.

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*From: Richard Hill, Audit Co. Chair & Records Coordinator*

Why I accepted a position on the Board of Directors of the California Pioneers. I am an artist at heart and do appreciate antiques and the preservation and restoration of same.

The Pioneers possess many historical artifacts of the pioneer days. Many are at the San Jose Historical Museum for safe keeping. Some are in other locations until we have a safe place to bring them all together. There are also many marvelous articles in our Pioneer archives.

I feel that I may be of help when we do obtain a decent building which we can use as a museum to show these treasured possessions. We would also then have our own meeting place and, if temperature and humidity controlled, it would be so much safer for the preservation of these historical pioneer artifacts.

Besides those reasons, I also enjoy knowing and working with the others on the Board and all the other members.

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*From: Tommy Warren, Fin. Secty/Membership Chairman*

Membership is the "heartbeat" of the California Pioneers of Santa Clara County. The Membership Chairman/Financial Secretary position allows me to provide direct support to our objective to which I am wholeheartedly committed. Through our organization and annual dues, we are able to cultivate fellowship with members and friends at the meetings, maintain a library, collect and preserve articles of historic value of the pioneer days of the state and county, assist financially to preserve historic buildings, and sponsor scholarship funds for best essays on Santa Clara County history by students of high school, college or anyone who wishes to enter an essay.

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*From: Helen MacCarthy, Essay Contest Chair & Archivist*

I particularly enjoy working on the essay contest. It is gratifying to see the interest taken by students and general public alike. The very best part is that I learn new things about our valley. I've lived here since I was six years old and every year when the essays come in, I find something new and interesting that I didn't know before. I eagerly await them every year.

## CANDID CAMERA



## DECEMBER LUNCHEON

### *Welcome New Members*

Margaret Bernier  
Stanley V. Bogosian  
Angela J. DiNovo  
Joseph J. DiNovo  
Dorothy P. Fleming  
Howard E. Fleming  
Frank J. Giacalone  
Mary A. Giacalone  
Billy J. Haley

Linda M. Herschbach  
Howard C. Hubbard  
June Hubbard  
Ellen W. Kampfen  
Anna Meridier  
Marjorie C. Saia  
Mel Saia  
Evelyn M. Ucovich  
Georgette L. White



### *Beyond The Sunset*

William (Bill) Chivers  
Hartley R. Church  
Albert R. Currlin  
Gladys Czapkay  
Edith B. Hitchborn

Wilna B. Martin  
Walter J. Mathlin  
Francis (Frank) Muller  
Helen F. Wise

# WHALE BLAZERS

SAN JOSE, April, 1902: Unusual events were taking place at the San Jose ostrich farm when at least ten of the 200-300 birds were to be "plucked". The event was always considered a phenomenon event to the hundred who arrived from near and far to witness the exceptional event. The "plucking" resulted in absolutely no injury to the ostrich.

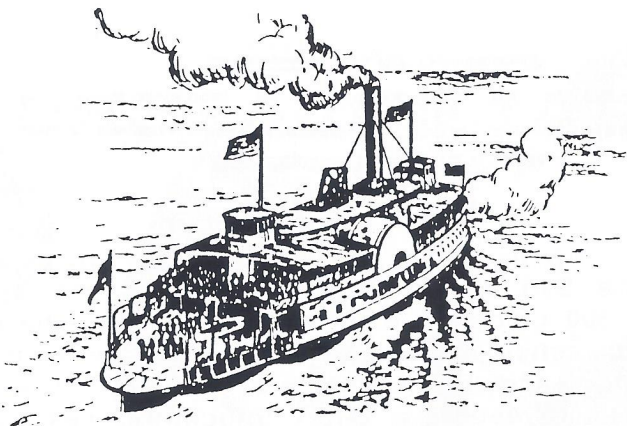
A black sack was placed over the bird's head immediately becoming surprisingly docile and easy to handle, offering very little resistance. The birds were "plucked" every eight months or so yielding up to six to ten exotic plumes said to have had a worth of \$40. each. The results of the "plucking" were always on display at the farm's office near King Road and Alum Rock Avenue as weresome of the largest eggs on earth.

SAN JOSE, March, 1903: The L.Hart & Son baseball team won an easy victory over the California Pioneers by the score of 12 to 2.

APRIL, 1903: County Supervisors asked for a repeat reading of the section on automobiles which did not allow their use on the Mt. Hamilton as well as the Los Gatos-Santa Cruz Road. "Furthermore," it is said, "within two years the auto should graduate from the status of a fad to a legitimate convenience. It will have very much the same gradual change as the bicycle in that respect. The day of 'road scorching' is practically past."

APRIL, 1904: San Jose's elite hotel Vendome was paying the highest cash prices for choice poultry by just rapping on the kitchen's back door.

SANTA CLARA, 1904: The Town Board was in the midst of a great need for a night watchman. Meanwhile, the town remained without protection during the late hours due to just only the \$25. per month allowed for the task.



## "WHEN OUR EAST BAY COMMUNITIES BID THEIR FERRY BOATS GOOD-BYE"

*January 15, 1939*

After 89 years of regular scheduled services across the San Francisco Bay -- Yes! Thousands of sorrowing East Bay commuters were saying goodbye to their floating institution. Their ferry was long the site and times for that breakfast, a card game, greeting old friends, meeting new ones or even falling in love.

According to the Oakland Tribune, at the time, most commuters took their final jaunt on this grand afternoon, to be the last gang plank stampede witnessed by the San Francisco Ferry Building as well as East Bay Terminals. The honor of riding the very last commuter ferry however, fell to a handfull of home bound Oaklanders aboard "The Alameda" which left San Francisco at 1:20 a.m. on January 15, 1939, with Captain William A. Ellsassar in command. With the departure, it was said that the familiar commute ferries sailed out of the daily lives of thousands into the pages of story books and San Francisco glitter.

As "The Alameda's" bow approached her slip, an electric train was being made up at the East Bay Terminus preparing to inaugurate regularly scheduled service via the Bay Bridge at 4:48 a.m. The train services offered by the Interurban Electric, the Key System and the Sacramento Northern brought time savings as great as 30 minutes, say some accounts.

Outstanding among the solitary ferry commuters were said to be the readers, the short-nappers who could wake on schedule after 18 minutes of placid nodding.

Most popular gathering sites aboard were the lunch tables and refreshment sites. Breakfast appetites alone, were said, to gobble something like 5,000 doughnuts and sweet rolls aboard daily. Also, one did not overlook the Christmas parties said to have been unlike any ashore including the rallies aboard on Big Game Day.

Besides, one did not ignore the first day of Fall when straw hats went overboard and further intensified the Gay 90 Bathing Beauty Contest below deck.

Yep! It has been 142 years now since one Captain Tom Gray advertised his "Kangaroo" for a twice-weekly service from San Francisco to the San Antonio Embarcadero, now East Oakland. His ferry fares then were \$1.00 per person, \$3.00 per horse, \$3.00 per wagon, \$5.00 for a two-horse wagon, \$3.00 per head for cattle, and \$1.00 a head for hogs.

Say! Let's not overlook the 192 tone "San Jose, a 101-foot stern wheeler built in 1892, lost by fire in 1932. Also, the paddle wheeler, "Santa Clara", built in 1851 was lost by fire the same year.



Henry "Hank" and Laura Calloway presented with a red rose at the December luncheon. Both are Life members of the California Pioneers, and they were the editors of the TRAILBLAZER for 14 years.

Hank contributed this article on the ferry boars, and he also provides the tongue-in-cheek Whaleblazers each issue. Many thanks to Hank and Laura!

# Touring With The Californians

*Barbara Johnsen*

*Tour Director*



## NORTH DAKOTA IS DIFFERENT!

July 6-16, 1992

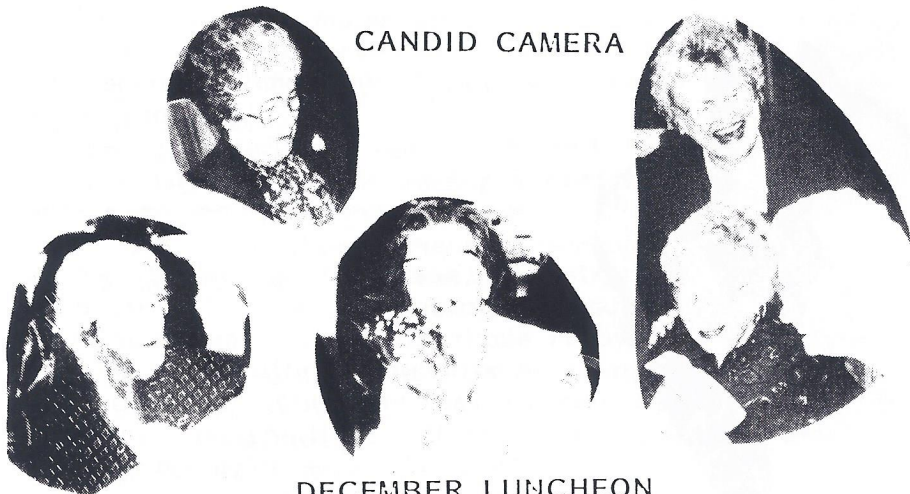
See the southwest section of this state with HELEN ARBUCKE, a native daughter. It is rich in heritage and frontier history. We visit the Theodore Roosevelt National Park and dine at the Rough Rider Hotel. Other highlights: Custer Battlefield

in the Valley of the Little Bighorn in Montana; the Buffalo Bill Historical Center in Cody, Wyoming; tour Yellowstone National Park and surround ourselves with nature's beauty in the Gran Teton National Park. May 1st is final sign-up day.

ALEXANDER VALLEY Saturday, March 28, 1992 - An enjoyable day as we tour the grape and prune growing areas of the Alexander Valley; wine tasting, annual Grange lunch, and the historic town church will host an antique and rummage sale.

TO MAKE RESERVATIONS call Nancy Hill at (408)258-3449.

## CANDID CAMERA



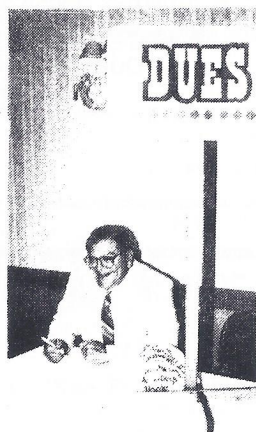
DECEMBER LUNCHEON

Annual dues are NOW past due! Over 365 members have yet to pay their dues. Those members who have not paid for 1992 by the March 7, 1992, luncheon will be considered delinquent and will not receive the TRAILBLAZER. The Financial Secretary will be available at the Luncheon to receive payments.

Those who wish to mail their payments can do so by sending the \$7.00 check along with a stamped self-addressed envelope to California Pioneers, P. O. Box 8208, San Jose, CA 95155. You will receive your membership card in the mail.

Any questions? Please call Membership Chairman/ Financial Secretary, Tommy Warren at (408) 241-8942.

MOVING? Let us know as soon as possible -- The Post Office will not forward your TRAILBLAZER. Worse yet, we are charged 29 cents for each RETURNED TRAILBLAZER!



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## CALIFORNIA PIONEERS OF SANTA CLARA COUNTY DIRECTORS 1991-1992

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SUNSHINE: Please notify of SICKNESS AND DEATHS

Leah Warren, 2032 Emory Street, San Jose, CA 95128 Phone: (408) 241-8942

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# MARCH 7, 1992 → IS OUR LUNCHEON

CROSSRIBS OF BEEF - POTATOES  
VEGETABLE - SALAD - DESERT -  
BEVERAGE .... \$ 10

*... Our speaker for this event will be*  
**Sharon Whaley**  
Public Relation Specialist  
**San Jose Water Works**

*Commenting on their 125 year history of service to the Valley.*

Please call 554-7587 for Reservations by Wednesday preceding the  
LUNCHEON DATE.