

1985 Santa Clara County Historical Essay Contest

"HOW LUCKY WE WERE."

Memories of Childhood in College Park
San Jose, California

By;

Mary Jane Champion Andrews
1676 Kensington Avenue
Los Altos, California 94022

(415) 969-2271

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"How Lucky We Were."

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Prologue

My mother, Mary Fisher Champion, who was a fourth generation Californian, a descendant of the De La Torre family of Monterey, and my father, William B. Champion, who became Chief Sanitarian for the city of San Jose, moved into a brand new house on University Avenue on the day of their marriage. My father died, at home in April of 1949, and my mother lived for the rest of her life in that very same house. She passed away there at the age of 83. We, her family, have always been very grateful to know that she did not live to see her home torn down for the airport.

The following true story is written in the memory of my parents, who made our childhood so secure, and so very happy.

"How Lucky We Were"

Every once in a while, **e**specially in the Spring, I take a "sentimental journey" back to the place in San Jose where I grew up. I don't know just what it is that I hope to find. The house where I spent the first 18 years of my life is gone, as are the homes of all of my childhood friends. The airport required their removal, but as I drive down University Avenue, I stop in front of what used to be 460, and if I close my eyes tightly, and if it is quiet, I can almost believe that it is 1930 again, and I am seven years old.

Some of my sweetest memories begin when I was even younger, as I can remember being pulled in a red wagon, down the unpaved street, by my step-grandfather, Michael J. Moran. There was no traffic, and this was good, for Grandpa Mikey was blind. He had been one of the plastering men when St. Joseph's Church was built, gotten lime in his eyes, and was now totally blind. He would pull my older sister and me to the railroad flag-station at College Park, and we would wave at the engineers. They would belch the steam at us, and sometimes throw us dimes. This was the same station which Jack London referred to in his novel, "The Call of The Wild".

I remember too, that herds of cattle were driven down what is now Coleman Avenue on their way to the stockyards which were out near Santa Clara. The dust would be flying everywhere, the cowboys on horseback yelling and galloping after strays, and the noise of the hooves, louder than any of the sounds that came from the switching steam engines at the roundhouse.

The street now called Taylor, was called Polhemus Street in those days, and it was actually paved. My Dad was the only person in College Park who daily drove a car: a Willys Knight, and when it came over the bridge on Polhemus Street, my mother would tell us to set the table for Dad was almost home. This was about five blocks away from our house, but the bridge was made of wooden planks which would rumble as my Dad drove over it, and we could hear the rumbling noise.

There were only three houses on our block on University Ave. in the late twenties and early thirties. The Striegel family lived on the corner, next to our house, then there was a shack next to us where a Japanese man we called Tom lived. On the corner of what is now Coleman and University was the Fitzpatrick house. This was a place of fun and mystery for us children. Fred and Katherine Barney, their two daughters, and Nana Fitzpatrick lived there. It had a tankhouse with a windmill, and we were never allowed near when the pump was on. They were afraid of something happening to the belt, which then might injure one of the children. There was also a huge barn, where farm equipment, and two wonderful old wagons were stored. One was a fringe-topped buggy, and one was a truck-type buggy which still had "Wendt's Meats" painted on the sides.

It was always dark and cool in the barn in the summer, and we spent many happy days playing cowboys and Indians there. Outside, in the field was an old buckboard wagon, and some rusting farm vehicles. What hours we spent playing there, until darkness, and my mother's call sent us home.

"Nana" Fitzpatrick's brother John Dorgan, and his wife, Harriet, who was Harriett Burnett, a grand-daughter of Peter H. Burnett, who was ~~an~~^{an}erly Governor of California, lived on the corner of Emory and Walnut. Theirs was the only house in several blocks, and they had a wonderful barn, a bunkhouse, and best of all, a few horses. Geraldine, Winnie Barney, and I had a favorite old white mare named "Maude" and we took turns riding her whenever we could. We had acres to ride in, and no real danger. The only time we were forbidden to go riding was when "Uncle Johnney" would bring some cattle to be branded from Hall's Valley. I remember his brand was a large "D-O" and the "hands" would lasso the cattle, throw them to the ground, and they were then branded with the red hot iron. We sat on the corral fence to watch this by the hour. It was always like being a part of a real "Cowboy Show".

All of the houses had "chicken yards", and raised their own poultry, from one or two geese and ducks, to a few turkeys, and two or three dozen chickens. I can still see my mother catching and killing the one or two she had decided would be for dinner on Sunday. If it was a holiday, it was usually a goose, and the grease would be carefully saved to rub on our chests in the event of a winter cold.

On the corner of what is now Coleman and Hedding Streets was our "store". Hedding Street was one of the first streets paved in the area, and it was a white concrete, separated by tar filled cracks. In the summer, the tar would melt and stick to our shoes, or to our feet if we were barefooted.

The "store lady", Mrs. Koetter, ran a small grocery store, and always had ^a huge selection of "penny candy". She scolded us frequently for failing to wipe our feet when entering the store, and grumbled about the sticky tar which we brought in. Diagonally across the street was the school we would all attend for the first six years of our school lives. College Park School had four classrooms, and a large auditorium with a huge stage. There was also a balcony, and in back of the auditorium was a lounge and kitchen, which the teachers used for their lunches, and the P.T.A. used for its refreshments during the meetings. Three of the classrooms had two grades each in them, and the smaller fourth room was used for kindergarten. It was also used for "school nurse" day, and oh how we dreaded the days when Dr. Marshall Mason would come to vaccinate, and immunize us. I can remember vividly that he called my father to the school to come and get me, for I had crawled under one of the tables, and refused to come out.

About every two weeks, a bouncy little man named Mr. Jeffers would come to give us some musical instruction, and I always loved those days. I had a good voice, with lots of volume, and he was always so pleased with my solos. Occasionally, a tall stern man named Mr. Horrall would come to visit. We children really didn't know who he was, but we were always aware that the teachers were very nervous when he was there. On those days, the "bad kids" would be sent to the cloakroom for misdemeanors which were ordinarily overlooked. I learned years later that he was an Assistant Superintendent of Schools.

There was also a rotund, scowling man who was always talked about, but not seen too often--the truant officer name^d Mr. Lake. Woe to the student who was summoned to Mr. Lake, for that meant real trouble. This happened very infrequently, for there were really very few of our generation who dared "play hooky". Parental warnings seemed to be all we needed to obey the rules.

The janitor, and coordinator of almost everything at College Park School was a cheerful, rather large lady name Mrs. Snyder. She played Santa Claus at the Christmas party, officiated at the monthly Whist parties, and kept everything, including the huge coal-burning stoves in the classrooms in good working order. There was a "girls side" and a "boys side" in the yard and we would never even think of playing on the wrong side. The bathrooms were located on either side as well, and woe to the student who ventured toward the wrong one.

One of the sixth grade boys was always appointed "coal monitor" and one of the girls was "bell monitor". These monitors were changed weekly usually as the results of the Friday spelling tests. The two highest scores would rate the monitor duties for the coming week. You see in those days, it was considered an honor to be chosen for these chores.

I remember many of my teachers, Mrs. Ross, Miss Plummer (who became Mrs. Helen Timpany), and especially, Mrs. Eveleen Minshall, who was my teacher in fifth and sixth grades. She encouraged us in many ways, not the least of which was our participation in the "operettas" which we would perform in the evening for the parents and guests. Bags of homemade candy were sold during the inter-

missions. The auditorium, as well as the balcony would be full, and all the hours it had taken to learn our "parts" now seemed so worthwhile. It was amazing how well we did, since none of us was over twelve years old, and we put on some rather deep performances. One of them which I remember well was called "Oh Cho San" which I now know was taken from Madame Butterfly. Mrs. Minshall also chose me to clean the teacher's lunchroom after school, and this enabled me to have spending money through the week, as I earned twenty five cents every Friday.

I spent at least an hour picking out ten cents worth of penny candy from Mrs. Koetter, and saved a dime to go to the Hester Theater on the Alameda on Saturday afternoon. The other nickel was saved for "bank day".

"Bank day" was a special day when someone from the "Bank of America" would come to the school to collect and post the pennies the children saved into their pass books.

There was also a "milk money day", but we four Champion girls did not participate in this program. Our milk was delivered every morning, two quart bottles left on our front porch by Mr. Ruff, who had the Ruff Dairy on Spring Street. Mr. Ruff had a son named Jonas, who was an early-day pilot, and we would often watch him as he flew low, over the fields near our home. I was saddened to hear that he was killed some years later in a plane crash.

Each day, our mail was delivered by, at first, a man named Mr. Chilson, who brought the mail on a bicycle. He was followed by a man named Mr. Ford. I remember being very impressed to see that his name was printed on his Model A truck, for it said FORD on the front of the radiator.

We also had a bread man, a vegetable man, and an "apple" man named Mr. De Smet. Mr. ^{De}_ASmet would deliver the most delicious pippin apples I have ever tasted. The ice man was our favorite, as he would often chip a huge piece of ice for us to eat on the hot days. We also liked it when, during the summer, the "sprinkler man" would drive down the dusty streets, sprinkling water as he drove along. We loved to run after him cooled by the water as it came spraying down. My mother was not too happy about this, for we would come home very dirty, needing baths and changes of clothes.

Every two weeks, a kindly man delivered coffee, and other goods my mother had ordered to our house. We knew him only as "The Blue Ribbon Man", and his treats were always very special, especially at Easter and Christmas. I still have some of the glassware he offered as premiums for buying certain of his wares, and these are more precious to me than some of the fine glass I now possess.

During the summer, we would walk down "the lane", (which was an extension of University Avenue) to Regent Street. A Mrs. Goldsworthy lived on Regent St., and each Saturday she would serve us Cambric tea, and read stories to us. I think she was one of the first to teach me the delights of reading, and its many rewards. What a patient, gentle lady she was to take the time to entertain four little towheads each summer Saturday. She also allowed us to catch pollywogs down at the creek which bordered her backyard.

At the end of University and Regent was a building called "Barclay's Hall". This was a special place for us, for each

Christmas there was a program given for all the children in College Park. Some of us would perform, I would sing, Andrew Cracolice would play his accordian, and Betty Rose and Bobby Haver would tap dance. Then Santa Claus would arrive, and we would each be given an orange, an apple, and a little box printed in a holly pattern which had hard candy and nuts inside. What a treat for us!

On the last day of the school year, there would always be a school picnic held at Alum Rock Park. All of the mothers would contribute to the feast, and all of us would take a taste of the smelly mineral water from the fountains. The best part was the swimming pool. It was indoors, and had a long, tiled white slide. We spent most of the day climbing the cement steps to the top of the slide, and then screaming as we slid down into the water. We were always famished after swimming, and how we would stuff ourselves on all the goodies the mothers had brought. We were exhausted at the end of that glorious day, and were always glad to see Dad drive up to gather us up and take us home, tired, full of good food, and very very happy. Then the long summer days would start.

At the age of about eight years, there now would begin about a month of getting up early, and going out to Evergreen to cut apricots. Auntie Lucy, my mother's sister, and her husband, Fred De Meza had several apricot orchards, and the cousins would all pitch in cutting and drying the crop. What a beautiful sight it was when the 'cots were cut, spread on the trays, and the trays in row after row in the sun for drying. I learned then how much work was involved in making a dollar or two. We were paid five cents a box for this effort, and it took me an hour to cut a forty-pound box of fruit. This job lasted until the middle of July, and we were finally set free to play through the long days, and into the warm evenings.

Swimming pools were few, and far between in those days, and there were none at all in College Park. Wading in some of the pools in Guadalupe Creek was the nearest thing to a "swimming hole" available to us, and this was a forbidden pleasure, as there were many "tramps" along the creek, and our parents had given us orders to stay away from the area.

Tuesdays and Thursdays then became really special, for these were "girls days" at Ryland Pool on North First Street. This was a round, concrete swimming pool, not too deep, and we gladly walked the mile and a half to and from Ryland Park on each of those days, carrying our bathing suits and a towel under our arms. We stayed in the water for hours, until the time for closing was upon us, and home we walked, anticipating dinner, for the activity of the day always left us famished.

The block bounded by University, Coleman, Hedding, and Walnut Streets, was owned by a family named Holman. The Holman house was on the corner of Hedding and Coleman, and the rest of the land was planted in hay. I loved the smell of the dirt when Mr. Holman would drive the horse-drawn plow through the "field" in the spring, and as the hay began to grow as spring neared summer, we delighted in running through the shoulder-high grass making secret passages much to Mr. Holman's distress. We also loved to run through the grass to school although the rough hay made our legs itch all day.

As the hay dried, it was mowed, raked, and stacked in rounded mounds throughout the field. What wonderful hiding places in the games of hide and seek we played through the late summer

evenings. Then, in the early part of August, the balers would come, rake up all our hiding-place haystacks, and as the horses went round and round activating the baler, the hay would be baled, wired, and stacked in a large castle-like mound. Even this did not deter us from our games, and we would find ways to climb to the top, and play "king of the mountain". One summer day in the early thirties, I remember seeing a large dirigible coming toward the area. It was almost noon, and the huge blimp cast its shadow on the stubble of the field. Quickly I climbed down from my perch, and tried to run as far as I could in the shadow of the blimp. I found out later that it was the Akron, and was on its way to Moffett Field.

By this time, the Barney girls had moved with their parents to Oakland and "Nana" was left alone. She would call me to do little chores for her, and I was always rewarded with some of her delicious Applesauce cake, or some cherries from her tree, or some sweet muscat grapes from her vines. Sometimes she would send me to the store with a dime for "a nine cent loaf of bread, and I could spend the penny". What a treat for me, and after long deliberation, I would usually choose a penny's worth of "hats". These were brightly colored, rubbery gum drop confections, molded in the shape of hats, and they lasted hours.

Sometimes "Uncle Charlie", my mother's brother would visit us and he was always good for a dime or a quarter. Then, if it were summer, we would go to the store for an ice cream bar called a "Milk Nickel". Oh how delighted I was the first time I got one that said free on the stick. This meant I had won another one.

Gerry and Winnie came every Friday to stay with Nana over the weekend. What fun we had during those Saturday evenings, playing cards with Nana, usually "Hearts" or "Pedro", in the old dining room. The front part of the house was shut off during the winter, and we would hear strange noises coming from the closed front rooms. All of us were afraid to go "down to the front room" when it was windy and dark. After our card games, I would race down the street with Nana watching until I blinked the porch light to indicate that I was safely inside.

We would get up early on Sunday mornings, and if the weather permitted, we would walk to Saint Joseph's Church for the eight o'clock mass. We were actually in St. Leo's Parish, but my mother preferred St. Joseph's, and although it was fairly distant, we never seemed to mind the walk. We also liked to hear a priest named Father Laherty preaching the sermon, for he seemed to be scolding the adults, and somehow this was appealing to us, for at last we were not the victims.

After breakfast, we would resume our games until about three o'clock in the afternoon, when Aunt Harriet and her sister "Miss Mary" would drive in to take the Barney girls back to Oakland. I always went along, reluctant to say goodbye to my friends, and looking forward to the "Potato Cake" and milk that their mother would have waiting for us. The old highway to Oakland was not heavily travelled in those days, and it was a pleasant, 'though lengthy ride to and from Oakland. Aunt Harriet's car was a huge black La Salle, four doors, and there were always fresh flowers in the vases in the sides of the interior of the back seat. As

she never drove over twenty or twenty-five miles an hour, I was ready for a bath and bed as soon as we arrived back home.

In those days, there were many "hobos", who rode the freight trains, and would frequently walk down our street, stopping at various doors, asking if they could do some work for a meal. They always were fed at our home, and I remember hearing my mother being chided for being so generous. She was told that the house was "marked", although no matter how much I looked, I could never find any "marks" around our house.

When I was about ten years old, aware that I could never be a "cowboy", I decided that the next best thing would be to be a singer in a Cowboy Band. I had learned to sing most of the songs that Dude Martin, and his Nevada Nightherders played on our old Gilfillan radio, and with Andrew Cracolice on the accordion, Bobby Moorhead on the harmonica, and I doing the vocals, we formed a group which we called "The Wyoming Wranglers". What a thrill it was to perform at a few lodge meetings, and find that people threw money on the stage for us to divide. We really needed a guitar player, and I decided that I was going to be that player. What I needed most was a guitar, and this seemed totally out of reach. What a surprise on my eleventh birthday when my Dad brought my present home from work that day. I had my guitar! Sadly, the band broke up soon after that, and I never did learn how to play the instrument, but Dad, who bought it at the California Loan Company on Market Street, made me the happiest girl in the world.

Fifty years have passed since my eleventh birthday, many changes have taken place. The "Big War" came, I left for nurse's

training, and never again lived in College Park. How I wish that my children, and now my *grand*children, could have had the chance to grow up there, as I did. "How lucky we were". We had nothing, but we had everything. We didn't even know that we were poor, and we really weren't. We were very, very rich.

The End

Epilogue

"For Jane"

By Beatrice C. Henkel 1985 Ash Grove, Missouri

...There was a little field. Across the street
The tall hay glistened in the summer sun,
Wind-ruffled, crisp and clean. With eager feet
We left the dusty road. A crouching run
Brought us deep into that sweet hiding place
Forbidden ground. Again we fell from grace.

Not children then, but multi-feathered Chiefs,
or cowboys fighting outlaws in the West
as each one acted out his firm beliefs
While fear of being seen lent added zest.
That farmer didn't want us in the field,
And if our folks found out, our fate was sealed.

Each year, of course, the denimed reapers came,
To leave no single stalk uncut. Ah well,
The haystacks in the stubble made our game
Of Hide and Seek last until darkness fell.
---Then balers; and they made a hill so high
That climbing it, we knew we touched the sky!

...One little field. For those in Childhood then,
A continent. Come, live it once again.

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by Beatrice C. Henkel 1985
Ash Grove, Missouri

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Margaret C. Ferreira
Ruth C. Cox

My Aunt: Beatrice Fisher Bernhart
420 North 6th St.
San Jose, California

Jack London: "The Call of the Wild"
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Myself and my memories
