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# CALIFORNIA THE FORNIAN

Magazine of the California History Center Foundation/De Anza College  
A Foundation Supporting the Study and Preservation of State and Regional History



**Feature:**  
**Laura Thane Whipple and the Creation of Moffett Field**

# Trickling Down to the History Center

Recession. The whole nation has been faced with it for the past three years. Yet, just as the rest of the nation seems to be shrugging it off, Californians appear to be mired more deeply in it. And, following the prevailing economic theory of the past decade, recession has finally trickled down to the History Center.

In response to the state's financial woes, De Anza College must lop \$3 million from its \$40 million budget for the fiscal year which begins July 1st. For some observers this may be seen as a reasonable cut in expenditures, just 7.5%. But cost reductions are rarely made evenly in any institution's programs. At De Anza, planned cuts will be far greater in some programs than in others, and unfortunately, the California History Center is one of the unlucky programs. We face as much as a 50% reduction in college support, including an end to our evening classes and the loss of two of three staff positions.

The primary mission of De Anza College always has been to provide programs which lead to the associate arts or science degree or for transfer into four-year colleges. The classes in these programs either fulfill general education and/or major requirements. Other programs and classes which primarily serve students for whom the degree or transferring is not the goal — students often referred to as "life-long learners" — always have fulfilled a secondary mission. Except for History 10, our California History survey course, the History Center's classes all fit in the secondary, not the primary mission.

Today the general college administrative philosophy, in large measure driven by shrinking financial resources, is to emphasize the college's primary mission. Since the college must reduce the size of its staff simply to be within budget and meet its primary mission, it is from other programs, those not serving the primary mission, that the heaviest cuts will be made. Thus, "life-long learning" programs are being looked to as the optimum place to save dollars, and the History Center is among those programs targeted to provide the savings.

Over the past 20 years, the college and our California History Center Foundation have developed a symbiotic relationship. The college has supported a wide range of classes in California

history and culture; the foundation has provided a library and research center, published books by students and local authors, offered tours and events, and mounted a variety of history exhibits. While this has been a solid and mutually rewarding relationship, it also has come to depend on sustained and generous college funding for the center's staff. Whereas the foundation has been able to support a librarian on an annual contract basis, the college has provided for the center's half-time director, secretarial, and two staff assistant positions.

While final decisions have not yet been made on what exactly will be cut by the college from the History Center's budget, we must prepare for the future. Consequently, the foundation board under the leadership of Roy Roberts is rethinking its mission and seeking to establish goals which will match new financial realities, and two things already are clear. A major priority must be building our endowment and our annual fundraising capabilities. Equally important, we must draw foundation members into more actively participating in planning and carrying out our activities.

I hope that each foundation member will see ways in which they can contribute to the challenges as well as new opportunities which will soon face us. Meanwhile, we'll keep doing our job — capturing, enjoying, and applying Santa Clara Valley and California history.

**Jim Williams**  
Director



Money contributed to the endowment is never spent; only the income it generates is utilized.

It's always a good time to donate to the endowment. Contributions are an excellent way to remember a family member or to have the satisfaction of knowing you are supporting history center activities over and over again.

**Cover:**

*Naval Air Station Moffett Field, scheduled for closure in 1994, has played a major role over the years in the growth and development of the Santa Clara Valley. Photo courtesy of the U.S. Navy, California History Center Archives.*

# CALENDAR

After several years of rising costs and increased competition by outside agencies, the decision was made in December to eliminate the tour program offered by the History Center. We do plan, however, to continue offering various types of programming at the center. Members will be kept informed of upcoming events.

**5/6 General CHCF membership meeting and State of the Foundation update.**

7:00-9:00 p.m. at the Trianon.

**5/23 De Anza Day**

10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. The history center is open during De Anza College's annual community event. Special activities are planned, including the annual Stockmeir Regional History Library book sale. No admission fee.

**5/31 Memorial Day observed. De Anza classes do not meet.**

**6/25 Spring quarter ends.**

**The history center will be closed beginning June 28th and will reopen September 14th. Have a nice summer!**

**Through 5/30 Exhibit, De Anza Odyssey:  
The First Quarter  
Century**



**3/27-28 "Shaping A State: Early American Settlers in California"**

**4/5 De Anza College classes begin.**

*For the First Time in a Long Time*

A General Membership Meeting  
and  
State of the Foundation Update

*Save This Date and Join Us*

**Thursday evening, May 6th**

7-7:30 – Coffee, cookies, camaraderie  
7:30-9:00 – CHCF and College Update  
Future Directions for CHCF  
(give us your thoughts/ideas/input)

*Watch for your invitation in the mail*

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## State and Regional History

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### **New Fees Have Major Impact on CHC Classes**

In the last issue of the **Californian** we printed an article about the state-mandated fee increases instituted on January 1 for all California community colleges. Enrollment fees increased from \$4.00 to \$7.00 per quarter unit for undergraduate students and to \$33.00 per unit for those students who have already earned a baccalaureate or higher degree.

This new fee increase had a major impact not only on student enrollment at the college, but on the classes offered by the center during winter quarter. In fact, of the seven evening courses offered three were cancelled for lack of enrollment, including the 4-unit, general survey, History of California class (unprecedented in recent times). Fewer students means less money from the state, so this development is of great concern to all of us.

Preliminary budget recommendations by Governor Wilson for the upcoming fiscal year, not only suggest additional fee increases for the state's community colleges, but a decrease in general funding as well. The implications for the future of the community college as we know it, do not paint a very bright picture. It is important that individuals let their elected representatives know how they feel about these fee increases and indeed the return to a more traditional "junior" college approach to education.

The center is offering the following classes for spring quarter. We hope you will take advantage of the opportunity to increase your knowledge of California's fascinating past while at the same time enjoying the camaraderie of other students of history.

*CHCF members who would like registration assistance must come to the center to register. Members may register 8 a.m.-noon and 1-4 p.m., Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays beginning March 16.*

*For complete course details, including times, dates and fees, please see the De Anza College spring schedule of classes.*

### **Neighborhoods of San Francisco: Betty Hirsch**

The neighborhoods of San Francisco are as diverse and ever-changing as the City's ever shifting population. The Haight, once quite respectable, gained notoriety when it became the first neighborhood in the United States to stop a freeway. The Haight walk guest guide will be San Francisco author Mark Gordon. Other neighborhoods to be studied include: St. Francis Woods, a classic residence park of grand houses and storybook cottages, Washington Street, with architectural styles from the Craftsman to French Baroque, Waterfront Walk from Marina Green to Ft. Point and other areas. Two lectures and two field trips included.

### **South Slav Influence in California: Elsie Matt**

The unique and fascinating history of the South Slav Americans is explored through lectures, film, research and field trips to historical points of interest in the Bay Area and Gold Country. The experience provides the student with an insight into the culture, traditions, and contributions of the South Slavs to the development of California and the Santa Clara Valley. Three lectures and two Saturday field trips.

### **Natural History of the Santa Cruz Mtns.: Tom Taber**

The Natural History of the Santa Cruz Mtns. is an interdisciplinary study of the relationship between human history and the natural environment, using the Santa Cruz Mountains to characterize significant trends in California history. Class sessions will include an overview of the geologic, climatic, and ecological characteristics of the coastal mountains of California. We will focus on the Ohlone Indians, Spanish colonization, the Mexican period, logging history, the encroachment of urban development, and the increasing interest in environmental protection, including the establishment of public parks and trails. Two lectures and three field trips included.

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**Sausalito at 100:** *Betty Hirsch*

Celebrate Sausalito! Endowed with a Mediterranean beauty, with its hillside homes in the treetops and marvelous views of San Francisco, the bridges and islands in the Bay, Sausalito has been a backdrop to a rich history of controversial people, places and events. Chief Marin, for whom Marin County was named, William Richardson, shipbuilder and developer, John Reed, early pioneer, and Sally Stanford, the Madam who became the mayor, are among the more illustrious luminaries who will be discussed. One lecture and one field trip.

**Golden Gate Park: Creating an Urban Wilderness:** *Chatham Forbes*

When the new concept of “urban wilderness” captured the hearts of American city planners in late Victorian times, two outstanding examples of the new kind of big city park were produced: New York’s Central Park, and San Francisco’s Golden Gate Park. Beloved to generations of San Franciscans, Golden Gate Park was created largely by its second designer, the renowned John McLaren. The story of the conception and remarkable construction of his indispensable feature of San Francisco’s image and civic furniture is vital to an understanding of the city’s historical character. Two lectures and two Saturday field trips included.

**Central Coast History:** *Brian Smith*

California’s Central Coast area, from Carmel and Monterey south to the San Luis Obispo area is rich in cultural history. This class takes a look at that history through evening lectures and several field trips to the area.

**Drake in California:** *Hugh Thomas*

Drake in California traces the general background of European exploration and expansion in the 16th century; the development and growth of England during the Tudor period; antagonism between England and Spain; the English privateers and the personal career of Drake, who circumnavigated the world, landing in California. Three lectures and one Saturday field trip included.

**California and the Wine World:** *Charles Sullivan*

California and the Wine World introduces the student to the major wine styles and types of Europe and traces their historical development there. It also identifies their counterparts in California. Six major categories will be studied and the thrust of

the course is historical with special emphasis on the evolution of California varietal and generic wines. After each major unit, there will be a comparative evaluation of the wines studied. Field trips to San Francisco included.

**History of West Valley Communities:** *Chatham Forbes*

United with the other Santa Clara Valley communities by regional geography and an agricultural economic base historically, the communities of Los Gatos, Saratoga and Monte Sereno are differentiated within the region by common access to, and dependence upon the stream systems and resources of the Santa Cruz Mountains. Lumber, ore and gravel deposits, transportation, climatic, and specialized agricultural and residential advantages set them apart in both early and recent times. Four lectures and four Saturday field trips included.



Two courses will be offered during spring quarter that focus on San Francisco’s illustrious past. One on the inspiration and building of Golden Gate Park and the other about the cross-section of neighborhoods that make San Francisco such a diverse city. Photo from the California History Center Archives.

## Laura Thane Whipple

by Mary Jo Ignoffo

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*For I dipt into the future,  
far as human eye could see;  
Saw the vision of the world  
And all the wonders that would be  
Saw the heavens fill with commerce,  
Argosies of Magic sails,  
Pilots of the purple twilight,  
Dropping down with costly bales  
Heard the heavens filled with shouting  
And there rained a ghastly dew  
From the Nations' airy navies  
Grappling in the central blue.*

Alfred Lord Tennyson, "Locksley Hall"

### Introduction

A verse from Tennyson's "Locksley Hall" is an apt beginning for a discussion of Laura Thane Whipple, a woman with uncanny foresight who visualized a giant air base to replace a thousand acres of hay and broccoli crops near Sunnyvale in the late 1920s. A tiny bit of newspaper with Tennyson's poem on it, probably clipped by Whipple herself, is among the personal papers and other clippings in the Whipple Collection at the California History Center Library.

Whipple was a real estate agent from Alameda County and it was her idea to try to convince the United States Navy to build their dirigible air base on the site of the former Ranch Ynigo, present-day Moffett Field. She helped broker the sale and option of properties and thus transformed her idea into action which culminated in the transfer of 1,000 acres to the Navy in 1931. This article discusses Laura Thane Whipple and her participation in the establishment of Moffett Field, thereby giving her the status she deserves in Santa Clara County's history.

### Biographical Background

Laura Maybelle Thane was born on February 9, 1875 to Lida Tilden Thane and Joseph Thane in Oakland, California. Among several prominent family members was Laura's uncle, Major Charles Tilden, the head of the East Bay Regional Parks, for whom Tilden Park in the Berkeley/Oakland area is named. In 1883, shortly after a Thane family outing through Nilas Canyon, Lida and Joseph Thane bought property and resettled there. Joseph

commuted daily on the Southern Pacific line to his insurance company in Oakland. Laura attended Union High School in Washington Township (present-day Fremont) and later enrolled in the University of California at Berkeley. At some point during Laura's childhood, she was thrown from a buggy and suffered a severe back injury for which she wore a brace for the rest of her life.

While a student at Cal, Laura met James Ray Whipple, an engineering student and football star. In 1898 the two were married in Nilas, and shortly after the turn-of-the-century they went to Juneau, Alaska where James worked as a civil engineer for mining companies with Laura's brother, Bart Thane. The Whipples lived just outside Juneau, until James' accidental death in a mining mishap in 1914. During the next two years Laura attempted to recover from the shock of the death of her young husband by traveling and ultimately left Alaska to return to her parents' Alameda County home.

After Laura's return to Nilas in 1916, she participated in philanthropic and civic causes. She joined forces with her mother, Lida Thane, and founded the Toyon Branch of Children's Hospital of Northern California. She started the area's first Campfire Girl program, and was involved in the Child Welfare Club of Washington Township. She helped to establish a local chapter of the University of California Alumni Association and she held several professional posts including Director of Food Conservation for Alameda County. She was also an outspoken advocate for the construction of the Dumbarton Bridge.

During the 1920s, Laura Thane Whipple sat for California state exam for issuance of a real estate license, and she began selling real estate. She brokered transactions for prominent landowners in Alameda and Santa Clara counties. One of her clients was Otto Hirsch who owned real estate and insurance businesses among several other enterprises in the Irvington District near Fremont. Mr. Hirsch was also the Postmaster of Irvington and owner of Mission San Jose Water Works. Among Hirsch's properties was a large parcel of grazing land near Sunnyvale and Mountain View.

### Her Idea

Besides her concern for local affairs, Laura Whipple also kept up-to-date on state and national news. The United States Navy's Rear Admiral William A. Moffett aggressively lobbied the federal government to develop a fleet of state-of-the-art dirigibles and contracts were awarded for the construction of two airships, the *Akron* to be stationed at Lakehurst, New Jersey, and the *Macon*,



*Laura Thane Whipple, left center. Gladys Williamson Collection, courtesy Fremont Main Library.*

slated to be based somewhere on the West Coast. About the same time Whipple learned from some Army officer friends stationed at the Presidio in San Francisco that the Army was searching for a West Coast site for a base as well.

Newspapers chronicled the progress the Navy was making in its dirigible fleet development, and the articles caught the eye of the seasoned real estate agent Whipple. She tried to think of a large enough site for a possible Bay Area location for a military base. Otto Hirsch's property near Sunnyvale came to mind, even though it was smaller than the government's published requirements.

Whipple decided to have a first-hand look at the land in question and, offering her elderly mother an afternoon outing, drove out to preview the property. As she stood there on a sunny, clear afternoon in November of 1928, looking out over the land, her increasingly impatient driving companion demanded to know what she was looking at. Quite simply Laura Whipple replied, "An air base." She clambered onto the hood of her 1926 Dodge coupe, box camera in hand, and took a series of snapshots. Her excitement grew as she drove home, where she took her idea first to Otto Hirsch. After a lengthy discussion, the two contacted Mountain View realtor William Wright and Sunnyvale's R. W. Pederson. Both were so intrigued by the idea that they brought it to their respective chambers of commerce. Pederson and Wright knew the property owners and were instrumental in aligning them to the cause. After enlisting this local help, Whipple pasted her photos together in a panoramic view of the site and sent them

with her proposal to Washington, D.C. for consideration by the United States Navy.

Her idea was presented by the newspaper editor at a Mountain View Chamber of Commerce luncheon, and one chamber member laughed and said, "Sure! Go on and offer it to them, Pop! If you can put that over we'll send you to Congress!" Chamber representatives went to a meeting in San Francisco to make a case for the "Mountain View" site for the Army. An Army officer pulled the Mountain View delegation aside and suggested that they hold off on encouraging the Army to build there, because he felt the area was so much more suited for the proposed Navy dirigible air base. The representatives reported back what had occurred at the meeting, and Mrs. Whipple began her effort in earnest to bring the Navy to Santa Clara County.

Her proposal and panorama of pictures was initially scoffed at by Navy officials, but undaunted, she enlisted the support of Congressman Arthur Free of Santa Clara County. Whipple also urged the San Francisco Junior Chamber of Commerce to spearhead the Northern California campaign with letter-writing to persuade the Navy to establish its new lighter-than-air base in Santa Clara County. Both Sunnyvale and county officials joined the effort while Chambers of Commerce in San Francisco, Oakland and San Jose were likewise convinced of the base's benefits to the Bay Area economy and supported Whipple's endorsement of the site. The Bureau of Aeronautics, under Admiral Moffett, analyzed ninety-seven possible sites and the choice was narrowed down to two: Camp Kearney in San Diego and the thousand-acre site in Santa Clara County. The arduous process of choosing between San Diego and Santa Clara County lasted three years.

### **Idea Into Action**

Laura Whipple recognized that the only way to compete with the San Diego deal was to raise funds to purchase the land outright from the property owners in order to offer the land free of charge to the Navy. Potential economic benefit to the county was motivation enough to want to give the land to the government. Otto Hirsch, for example, was awarded three government contracts for hauling gravel to the air base site. The San Francisco Chamber pledge to raise a half-million dollars to purchase the property. Fundraising campaigns netted contributions from every town in the Bay Area including San Jose's pledge to raise \$60,000

of the \$100,000 quota for the county. Several county businessmen formed the Santa Clara Consolidated Air Base Committee to manage the fund drive, with banker Charles Spalding representing Sunnyvale.

Mrs. Whipple was in contact with each of the property owners and was able to convince them to accept an offer from the air base committee to purchase the land for approximately \$450 per acre. After the selling price was negotiated, an escrow account was opened at San Jose Abstract and Title Company. Closing the sale of each parcel, except for those purchased outright by Otto Hirsch's Hirsch Land Company, was contingent on the acceptance by the United State Navy of the land. The cash to pay the property owners came from the fundraising campaigns around the Bay and substantial donations to the cause by some San Francisco businessmen.

The land itself was a portion of what had formerly been known as "Rancho Ynigo" or "Posolmi," the site of an ancient Indian village. The 1,700 acres had been granted to Lupe Ynigo (sometimes Lope Inigo) in 1844 by then-Governor Micheltorena of Mexico. Ynigo was one of the few surviving descendants of the native population of California, and was one of a very few who were ever officially acknowledged with a government sanctioned land grant.

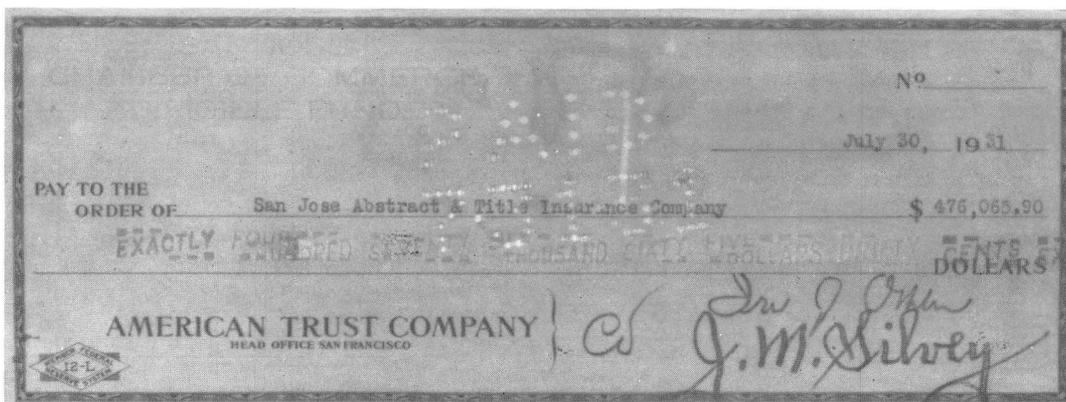
During the 1850s, as Euro-Americans poured into California, many original grantees were under extreme financial pressure to sell or vacate their land. Ynigo sold pieces of his property, primarily to Scotsman Robert Walkinshaw, with the stipulation that he and his family could remain on the land for life. Ynigo and Walkinshaw both died and the property was divided further. By 1876, D. Frink owned 400 acres, J. Bailey had 300 acres, E. Jenkins maintained 155 acres and the remaining 800 acres were

divided between the Gallimore and Walkinshaw heirs. Later, Jenkins' tract was divided in three, Roy Somers bought Frink's land, and J. F. Cunningham owned 688 acres of former Walkinshaw property.

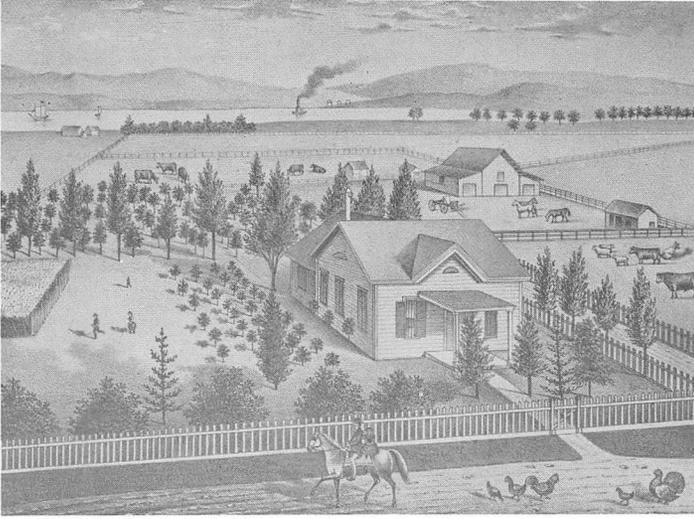
By the time Laura Whipple wanted to piece together a real estate deal in 1929 so that the Navy would build a base in Santa Clara County, the land was owned by eight different individuals or companies. She carefully planned and executed what would become a massively complicated real estate deal to woo the United States Navy. A small handwritten note survives in which Laura Whipple jotted down the expiration of outstanding leases on four of the parcels: Gallimore on December 1, 1929; Medeiros on November 20, 1929; Dr. Henry Wong Him on October 24, 1929; Fosgate-Lion Seed Company on October 15, 1929.

Hirsch Land Company owned the bulk of the land. Merrill Lion owned a portion which was leased to Fosgate-Lion Seed Company. Minnie and Antone Medeiros struggled against the onslaught of the Depression, and numerous references in Santa Clara County records show attachments, liens, notices of default, and also a tax sale. The South Shore Port holdings owned some land that was sold, as did Henry Wong Him of San Francisco. The Holthouse family owned land directly adjacent to the proposed site, and they sold a portion to the project. A few years later when Moffett Field expanded, the Holthouse Ranch was pushed to the limits. They ended up selling and relocating in South Santa Clara County.

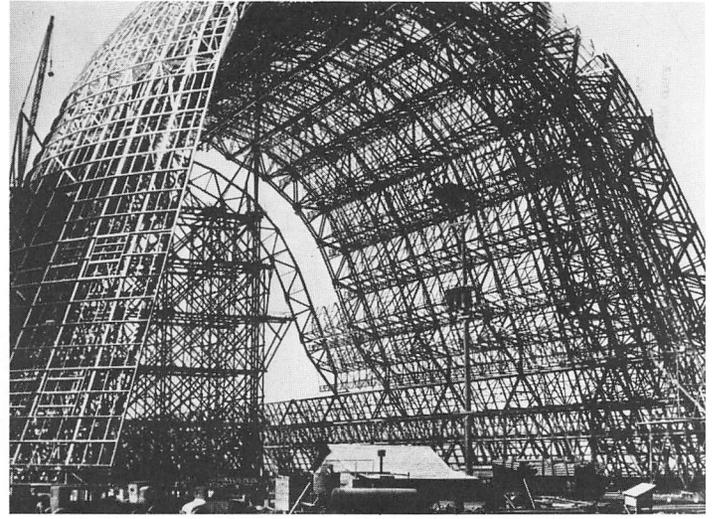
Laura Whipple worked diligently to convince local citizens and national politicians alike to choose the 1,000 acres in Sunnyvale as the site for the airbase. In a 1930 note to a personal friend Mrs. Whipple explained, "Since taking to the 'Air' I have not been fancy free . . . The Air Work has simply made it impossible



*This check was used for the purchase of the 1,000 acres presented to the United States Government for the establishment of the United States Navy Dirigible Base in Santa Clara County, California.*



Jenkins estate drawing from Thompson and West, 1876. CHC collection.



Construction of Hangar One. Photo courtesy U.S. Navy, California History Center Archives.

for me to concentrate on anything else.

Local real estate agents became aware of Mrs. Whipple's participation in the campaign to bring the Navy to Santa Clara County. Some agents sent letters of inquiry to Whipple, and offered other sites for her consideration to pass on to her clients.

A Palo Alto agent, Mr. D. M. Baird, wrote Whipple,

"I understand you are interested in promoting the Sunnyvale air base location and also in other subdivision projects . . . There is a piece of property in Los Altos containing approximately two hundred acres adjacent to property now developed and being put on the market . . ."

Others asked Whipple if she could locate the kind of land that they needed for their clients. Emil Fritsch of Oakland wrote to Whipple asking if she knew of a site of 35 to 100 acres "good for garden truck raising." In signing off Fritsch noted, "I see the Government is still interested in your Sunnyvale base! Here's hoping you win."

A promotional film made to convince Navy brass of the advantages of a Sunnyvale airbase featured footage of Sunnyvale and the 1,000 acres as seen from the Bay and the air. Promoters quickly realized the film, which featured footage of familiar surroundings, could also be used to rally citizen support for the proposed base and simultaneously raise the needed cash. Residents flocked to theaters all over the Bay Area to see the film, and proceeds went to the fund-raising effort. On May 23, 1930 the promotional film was shown at the Strand Theatre on Murphy Avenue in Sunnyvale, raising \$70 to contribute to the effort.

### Idea Becomes Reality

In the spring of 1930, representatives of the Chambers of Commerce of San Francisco and San Jose as well as the San Francisco Junior Chamber and the *San Francisco Chronicle* went to Washington, D.C. to urge Congress to approve the proposed base at Sunnyvale. Colonel Charles Lindbergh appeared at a secret

session of the House Committee and supported Sunnyvale as the location of a new air base as well as an aeronautical research center. The Sunnyvale site was chosen on December 12, 1930, generating such excitement that schools and businesses closed and impromptu parades formed. The placement of the base in the county would, people hoped, bring relief from financial hardships facing the valley.

Representative Arthur Free introduced a bill in Congress to authorize the acceptance of the land offer by the government and approval of an additional expenditure of \$5 million for structures and development. The bill passed and was signed by President Hoover on February 20, 1931 and the land was transferred to the United States Navy for the cost of \$1 on July 31, 1931. County records indicate that money from the sale of the land was transferred to at least some of the property sellers on this same day.

The location of the Naval Air Base in Sunnyvale met with very little opposition in Santa Clara County. The 1,000-acre site was actually located halfway between the towns of Sunnyvale and Mountain View. Early proponents suggested it be called Naval Air Station Mountain View-Sunnyvale, but Navy officials thought that the word "mountain" in the name would conjure images of mountainous peaks in the minds of Congressmen back in Washington, D.C. and would generate unnecessary questions about flight safety in the area. In order to dispel any mental pictures of mountains, the Navy referred to the site as NAS Sunnyvale, a more pastoral-sounding name. Ironically, the Mountain View Register Leader referred to "Mountain View's air base" long after the name NAS Sunnyvale was generally accepted.

The giant dirigible the *Akron* visited the new air base on May 13, 1932, and it was greeted by tens of thousands of curious county residents. One hundred thousand spectators jammed into Stanford Stadium in the predawn hours to get a spot from which to glimpse the mammoth airship. Local authorities expected the spectacle to



## 100,000 TO SEE AKRON ARRIVAL

**Airbase Force of Highway  
Patrol to Number 60  
on Akron's Visit**

The State will face its biggest traffic problem of history at Sunnyvale airbase next month.

This is the statement of E. Raymond Cato, chief of the California highway patrol, who predicts that

Photo courtesy U.S. Navy. Photo and newspaper headline from the California History Center Archives.

generate “the biggest traffic problem in state history” and went to great pains to publish maps in the press in an attempt to control crowds.

Earlier that year Arthur Free had introduced another bill to Congress to appropriate \$295,000 for an additional 700 acres adjacent to NAS Sunnyvale for an airplane landing field. The adjacent land involved another portion of the Holthouse ranch and Medeiros family property. Both families were offered \$421 per acre, but they felt they should have been compensated the same that they had for the earlier transaction: \$450 per acre.

Ground-breaking was in October 1931, and by the end of 1932, Hangar One was complete along with several other buildings. Hangar One, the elongated dome which had “orange peel” doors mounted on tracks, stood eighteen stories high and the floor covered eight acres. Construction cost \$2,250,000; the mooring masts alone cost \$25,000.

Naval Air Station Sunnyvale was commissioned by the Navy on April 12, 1933, but the festivities were overshadowed by disaster because the *Akron* had crashed on April 4th off the New Jersey coast. Only three of the seventy-six men aboard survived. Not only was the “fleet” instantly cut in half by this accident, but

the most experienced personnel were lost as well. Rear Admiral William Moffett, aeronautics chief, perished in the *Akron* crash which was a crushing blow to the fledgling dirigible program. The next month, on May 18, NAS Sunnyvale was renamed Moffett Field Naval Air Station in honor of Admiral Moffett, becoming the first Naval Air Station to be named for a person rather than a geographical location.

Later that year, on October 16, 1933, the *Macon* made its grand and long awaited appearance in the skies above the Santa Clara Valley. The *Macon* was a rigid airship, built with a vast aluminum framework and covered with a lightweight cotton fabric, then painted with six layers of airplane varnish. The massive dirigible measured 785 feet in length and 133 feet in diameter. The dirigibles acted as flying aircraft carriers and five Sparrowhawk fighter biplanes fit in the cavernous belly of the airship.

As the mighty airship silently floated toward its new home at Moffett Field, farmers left their toil, children climbed on rooftops and people everywhere in the valley reverently watched the wondrous, colossal and magical beast make its way to the cavernous Hangar One. For the next eighteen months, the *Macon* was a familiar sight in the skies over Santa Clara Valley as it

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went it and out for maneuvers but the excitement and the wonder of it all never waned.

The *Macon* was initially commanded by Alger H. Dresel, and after fifteen months Lt. Commander Herbert V. Wiley took over. Unfortunately, on a return trip from the Pacific on February 11, 1935, the *Macon* encountered fierce winds off the Monterey coast. The upper tail fin was ripped from the airship, fatally puncturing three helium cells. Its descent to the sea was slow, enabling most of the crew to survive, and all but two of the eighty-one person crew were rescued. The loss of the *Macon* in 1935 left America with one surviving dirigible, the German-made *Los Angeles*. When Germany's hydrogen-filled *Hindenburg* burned at Lakehurst, New Jersey in 1936, the lighter-than-air program completely collapsed.

Laura Whipple took great pride in her involvement in the site selection of Moffett Field and her role as acknowledged by her contemporary realtors and the press at the time. However, once the land was purchased and delivered to the Navy and construction began, Whipple's involvement diminished and her earlier efforts were largely forgotten.

The Navy, however, did not forget the role that Mrs. Whipple played in the genesis of their base. In a special ceremony on September 28, 1962, Laura Whipple, then 87 years old, was presented with honorary United States Aviator Wings by base commander Captain George Clifford in recognition of her participation in the establishment of the base. The day was proclaimed "Laura Whipple Day" at Moffett Field, and a reception to honor her followed the ceremony. Laura was deeply gratified by the honors bestowed on her that day. The *Palo Alto Times* noted that "she was a leading player in the drama that brought the Navy to the Midpeninsula," and that "she convinced the Navy of the advantage of locating the base on the old Posolmi Rancho tract . . . ."

Laura Whipple died at the age of ninety-one on August 1, 1966 and one newspaper referred to her as "Washington Township's grand old lady." Laura had lived in her parents' 11 room home at 38555 Overacker Avenue since her return to Niles in 1916. Mrs. Whipple left her entire estate to her housekeeper and companion of many years, Mrs. Lupe Galvan. The huge, old house and all of its contents were auctioned off in 1967.

## Conclusion

Although Laura Thane Whipple lived most of her life in Alameda County, her real estate career in Santa Clara County in the late 1920s and 1930s has earned her a place in the county's history.

The impact on Santa Clara County by the presence of Moffett Field has been analyzed and acknowledged. Up to 1930, and for a few years thereafter, the economic strength in the County came from farming, primarily non-citrus fruit trees. The presence of the Navy at Moffett Field, coupled with Stanford University, made the county ripe for the transformation that took place after World War II. As author Spencer Gleason noted: "The establishment of Moffett Field in many ways served as a marker between the past and present tempo of Santa Clara Valley's economic and social growth."

Laura Whipple deserves more recognition as a historical figure in Santa Clara County than she has heretofore received. Not only was she a unique woman in a competitive profession made up almost exclusively of men, but she masterminded a real estate transaction that has had lasting implications for Santa Clara County. It is impossible to say that Moffett Field would never have been built if not for Laura Whipple. It is highly probable, however, that the base would have gone to San Diego since officials there were already organized to offer Camp Kearney to the Navy by 1930. Whipple is not the reason the Navy built in Sunnyvale, but she was the spark and kindling that ignited the cooperative regional effort to woo the Navy to the South Bay.

*Ignoffo, who has a master's degree in history, is a board member of both the Heritage Council of Santa Clara County and Sunnyvale Historical Society and Museum Association. In addition she is the author of "Sunnyvale - From the City of Destiny to the Heart of Silicon Valley," an updated, rewritten edition of a 1974 California History Center publication.*

*The above article was the 1992 first place award winner in the annual essay contest sponsored by the California Pioneers of Santa Clara County. Printed with permission.*

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# CULTURAL PRESERVATION

## Women Writing History: Recognizing Women Historians

by Mardi Bennett

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Fox



Jacobson



Loomis



Pierce



Martinez

As March is officially recognized as Women's History month, we are pleased to highlight several women historians living and working in the Santa Clara Valley.

Last November the national elections were heralded by the press as one of the most significant victories for women, ever. For the first time in almost 150 years, California voters elected two women Senators to represent them in Washington. It was an historical event which was replicated by other successful women candidates throughout the United States.

Although the record number of victories in one day was an outstanding milestone, the struggle for recognition by the female sex is a story that, until a few short years ago, did not make headlines. In fact, from the time when women first arrived in California with their families, they were mentioned in the press, and by historians, mainly in relationship to their menfolk.

All the 19th century historians on the county level were men. In their view, women settlers played a very small part in taming the frontier. San Jose Historian Clyde Arbuckle refers to these early volumes of county history as "mug books." Typically, the first few pages were concerned with history, but the rest were devoted to biographies and photographs of noteworthy residents of the area who had paid the publisher for inclusion in the book.

The most enlightened historian of that era was H. S. Foote, the editor of *Pen Pictures from the Garden of the World*. His 670 page book updated the history of Santa Clara County to 1888. The first 215 pages were history. The other 455 pages were biographies.

A quick tally of *Pen Pictures* by the comparatively enlightened Foote, shows 801 male biographies, 21 female. One example of the latter is just one sentence: "Ellen Murphy married Chas. M. Weber, of San Jose, afterwards of Stockton." The book also included clear full-page portraits of 55 men and 1 woman.

These facts disturb San Jose writer and historian, Helen Arbuckle, who is researching the depth and breadth of what she calls, "the unmentionable status of women" in local histories from the 1850s to the present. Arbuckle is writing a book about the positive contributions of women in the history of Santa Clara County.

The first reversal of the long-established trend came in 1955. That was the year a San Jose historian, Bertha Davison Rice (dec.) published, *Women of Our Valley, Vol. I & II* in which she completely ignored the presence of our county's men. Rice's next effort, in 1957, had a slightly broader perspective when she wrote and published *Builders of Our Valley, Vol. I and II*.

Several other women historians have followed Rice's lead. Each has added a more balanced view of important events of the past.

### FRANCES MRAZ FOX

The love of local history led Frances Fox to write the *Bibliography of Santa Clara Valley, Landgrant to Landmark, Luis Maria Peralta and his Adobe, Rinconada de Los Gatos, and Hakone Gardens*. Fox' attention to detail and penchant for accuracy had been established when she was selected to edit the voluminous notes left by Florence Cunningham in 1967. The book, treasured by Saratogans, is called *Saratoga's First Hundred Years*.

Besides writing books and articles for historic publications, Fox has been an instructor at the De Anza College History Center, has lectured extensively, and led tour groups of San Jose's historic neighborhoods.

Frances Fox was born in Los Gatos in the Vasona Lake area. She, and husband Theron Fox, raised two daughters in San Jose, and share six grandchildren.

### YVONNE OLSON JACOBSON

Born on a Sunnyvale fruit ranch on land which changed from "the valley of heart's delight" to the heart of Silicon Valley,

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Jacobson had grown up steeped in the traditions of the agricultural community. She lamented the progress that forced change in the use of fertile land to accommodate the post World War II population influx and industrialization.

Jacobson recorded the era in two ways: a museum exhibit of rare photographs from private collections of nineteenth/twentieth century family farms; and a descriptive portrait of *Passing Farms: Enduring Values*, a 242-page book that highlights the role of valley farm families from 1848 to the present.

She has been a contributor to local history magazines as well as writing short stories and poetry on other subjects. Jacobson has taught courses on mythology at San Jose State University and art appreciation at De Anza College. She is past president of the California History Center Foundation Board of Trustees.

Yvonne and Ed Jacobson raised three children in the Los Altos area.

#### **PATRICIA LOOMIS**

Although born in San Francisco, "Pat" Loomis grew up in Arroyo Grande, California. She earned her BA in Journalism from San Jose State College in 1943 and was hired by the San Jose Evening News. Within three months she moved over to the Mercury and stayed for forty years.

Her lifelong fondness for local history came to the fore when she was assigned the "obits." Loomis' thorough research of family histories for the obituaries convinced the editor to give her a six week trial history column. It was centered on street names and the old families for whom the streets were named. The "Signposts" series, which made history come alive with the Loomis high good humor, became so popular it stretched into a weekly column from 1971-81. Excerpts were reprinted in two books, *Signposts I* and *Signposts II* by the San Jose Historical Museum Association.

In 1986 the California History Center published her book *Milpitas, A Century of Little Cornfields (1852-1952)* for their Local History Studies collection.

#### **MARJORIE UPSTILL PIERCE**

Marjorie Pierce also wrote for the San Jose Mercury News. Her freelance column, which ran from 1957-88, began as "Socially Yours" and was later called "People Watching."

Although contracted as a weekly column, it often appeared four times a week. Her Sunday columns focused on old California families and homes. An outgrowth of these columns was the 1977 book *East of the Gabilans*, a fascinating tale of the development of the former lands of Mission San Juan Baustista, which is now

in its fifth printing. In 1991 she wrote *San Jose and its Cathedral* to coincide with the restoration of St. Joseph Cathedral, a part of the revitalization of downtown San Jose.

Although born in San Bernardino County, Marjorie Pierce was raised in Los Angeles. She, and husband, Bob, and their two children, have lived in San Jose since 1948.

#### **EVELYN ROMERO MARTINEZ**

Evelyn Martinez was born at the Presidio in San Francisco and came to San Jose in 1956. She is widowed, has three children and eight grandchildren.

Martinez is an 8th generation Californian. She is a direct descendant of Jose Sinova and Maria Bojorquez, two of the original 66 founders/pobladores of el pueblo de San Jose on November 29, 1777.

Martinez has specialized in the Spanish/Mexican-Californio period of Alta California history and genealogy for the past twelve years. She uses primary sources for her facts and has documented previously undiscovered information. A direct result of this research is her book, *My Family Backbone*, published in 1984, and rewritten in Spanish in 1986, and her 1989 membership Bonus Book for Los Californios, *Antepasados, Vol. VII*.

From 1984-89 Martinez edited *Los Californianos Noticias*, a quarterly newsletter on early California history and genealogy. From 1989 to the present she has been editor/publisher of *Los Fundadores*, a quarterly newsletter of county history. Since 1977 she has been a freelance contributor to the Spanish language publications *La Prensa*, *El Mundo*, *La Oferta* and *El Observador*, and columnist for *Chismografic* and *Ecoxentrico*.

Among others who have written vividly of their own locale are Saratoga rancher Emma Stolte Garrod (dec.), who wrote *One Life, Mine* in 1977, and three former mayors: Jeanette Gomes Watson, *Campbell, the Orchard City*; Beth Dunham Wyman, *Hiram Morgan Hill*; and Mardi Durham Gualtieri-Bennett, *Images of Long Ago*, Los Gatos, Saratoga, Monte Sereno.

Palo Alto resident, Phyllis Filiberti Butler's 1975 book describing historic buildings from 1792-1920 titled, *The Valley of Santa Clara*, went into its third edition this past year. Connie Young Yu's *Chinatown San Jose, USA* was selected as the San Jose Museum's 1992 Membership Bonus Book.

It appears that the 20th century witnessed the giant strides of women, not only in politics, but in the recording of all the giant strides made in many fields of the valley of heart's delight.

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