

Alhambra Valley

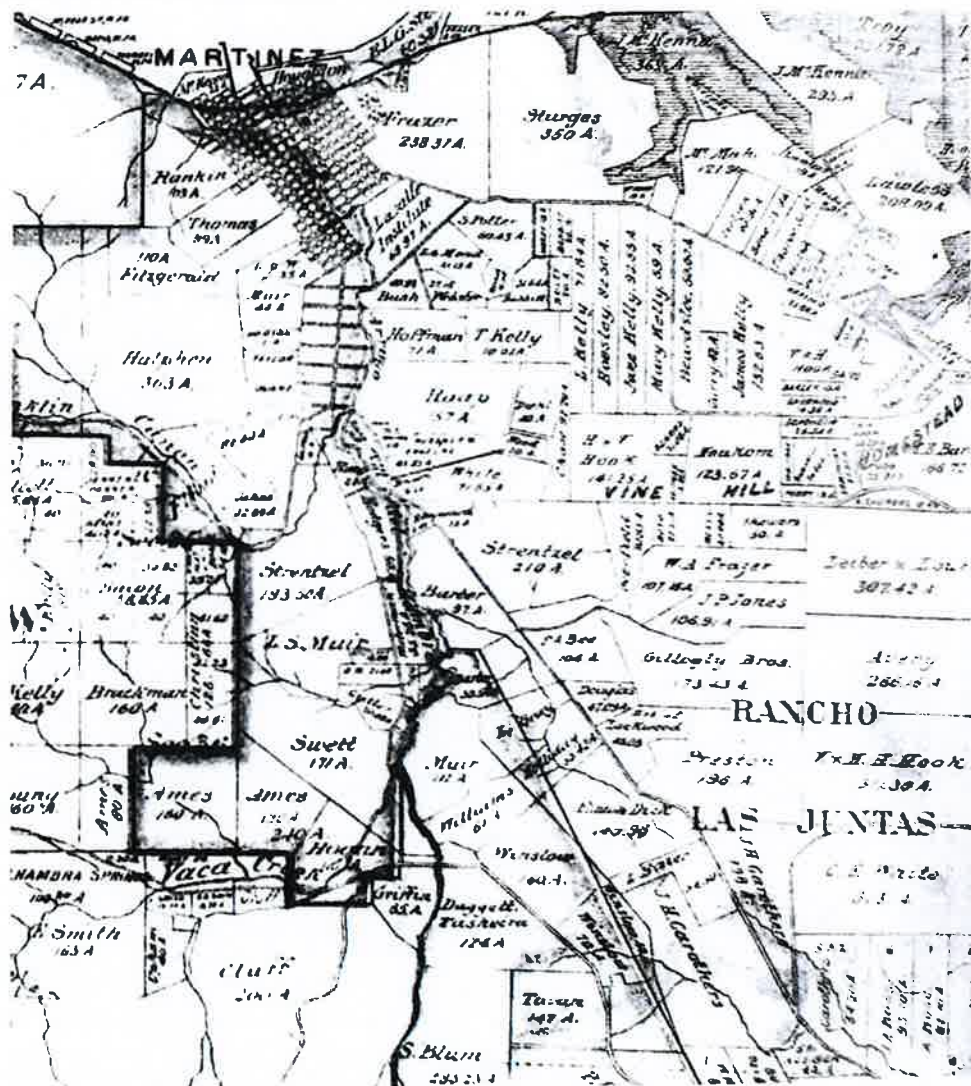
Rural America Disappears

By

Monty Lindstrom and Robert Griffin



Contra Costa County Historical Society



Detail of an 1894 Contra Costa County map which identifies the land owners of Alhambra Valley and adjacent areas.

Cover: The Alhambra Valley Hill Girt Ranch of John Swett, famed California educator. View in the late 1880s shows historic Altamirano Adobe (left, with porch); the Swett winery, far right; and Alhambra School on rise in the background.

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THE ALHAMBRA VALLEY, WEST OF THE CENTRAL OR great Diablo Valley, and only divided by three miles of rolling hills, opening on the Straits of Carquinez, is narrow and but a few miles in length, but fertile and picturesque in its fringes of evergreen oaks, and dots of cottages white, and life in toiling, happy man, and useful beast." So it was then, in 1882 when J. P. Munro-Fraser described it in Slocum's *History of Contra Costa County California*. Now, Alhambra Valley is losing much of its toiling, happy man and useful beast before the onslaught of urban America.

Alhambra Valley stretches from the Muir home at the North to the Briones Hills on the South, from Vaca Canyon on the West to the Tavan ranch at the East. It is surrounded by the round Contra Costa Hills. On the Valley floor flow two creeks which junction at Wanda Way, Alhambra creek and Arroyo del Hambre or Vaca creek. Oaks, buckeyes, eucalyptus and California bay laurels grow on the hills while the valley floor is divided between fruit orchards, vineyards and residential areas.

A band of Mexican soldiers were chasing predatory Indians when they camped in the Valley in the early 1800s. Their food supply ran out and, as a consequence, they named their camp Cañada del Hambre, the Valley of Hunger. After they left the Valley, they received their first food on the shore of the San Pablo straits which they named Pinole, an Aztec word for meal ground from grains. The word Pinole was perpetuated by Ignacio Martinez when he named his rancho El Pinole.² Somewhere in the late 1850's, Mrs. John Strentzel changed the name from El Hambre to Alhambra. It is said that she didn't like her beautiful valley associated with hunger.¹

The Saklan Indians, the tribe of Costanoan Indians which predominated in the area, certainly didn't go hungry. As most Californian Indians, they were not considered "advanced." They

could live very easily off the land eating mussels, fish from the creeks, acorns from the oaks and if the "spirits smiled," they might catch a deer or an elk. If times were hard, they'd eat wild grass seed, vegetation and the grubs which gave them the familiar name "Digger." Dr. John Marsh is quoted in Slocum's *History* as saying:

"In February and March they live on grass and herbage; clover and wild pea-vine are amongst the best kind of their pasturage. I have often seen hundreds of them grazing together in a meadow like so many cattle."

The authors of the *History* then add:

"If Doctor Boudinot only knew this fact, he would undoubtedly start a new theory that they are the descendants of Nebuchadnezzar."

Dr. Marsh describes these people as stout, heavy-limbed and "as hairy as Esau, and with beards that would gain for a Turk honor in his own country." They had short, broad faces, wide mouths with thick lips, broad noses and low foreheads. Their dress was often nothing, sometimes a few skins. In winter and cold mornings the men would cover themselves with mud. Their dwellings consisted of a protection of branches in the summer and a wickiup in winter. Of their language, which to civilized ears sounded hoarse and guttural, nothing but a few place names remain. The outstanding of these is the Carquinez Straits which is named after a tribe of Costanoan Indians.

The grand Indian cure-all for disease was the sweat bath in a temescal. After a few hours of sweltering and mad, violent dances in this large, mud-covered hut, they would all plunge into a cold stream. A white man who witnessed a sweat bath described it thus: "Round about the roaring fire the Indians go capering, jumping and screaming with the perspiration streaming from every pore." Unfortunately the temescal couldn't cure the white man's diseases. Fifty years of Caucasians wiped out

the whole Costanoan people. Cholera took them by thousands in 1833. Contact with the Mexicans signalled the end of the Indian Era.⁶

The early Californians were completely rural. They had almost no contact with civilization, living on self-contained ranchos, many as large as a European duchy. The land was fertile and new and the Mexicans prospered. All of Alhambra Valley was contained in Ignacio Martinez's Rancho El Pinole. In the South was the Briones family's Rancho La Boca de la Cañada de Pinole and in the West was Rancho Cañada del Hambre belonging to the Soto family. Don Ignacio Martinez was born in Mexico during our Revolutionary War. He served at army posts in Santa Barbara and San Diego. Through an error made in documents he was transferred to San Francisco against his will.⁷ "He abhorred the place and strove by all means to get himself transferred," wrote an unnamed contemporary. At San Francisco Martinez quickly worked his way up to comandante of the Presidio, making enemies on the way. A Galindo supposedly called him a "sanguinary despot" while General Vallejo said that Martinez's various misfortunes may be considered divine punishments for sundry sins.⁸

In 1823 Ignacio Martinez received the grant of El Pinole comprising 17,786.49 acres. He built up a successful rancho based on cattle and constructed a large hacienda. On his rancho grew the first fruit trees and the first grapes in the area. Martinez and his family lived in adobe structures, a mixture of local soil and weeds or hay as a binder.⁹ The floor of their adobe was probably uneven packed dirt, doors and windows were open to the elements and no provision for heat was made.¹⁰ Ignacio Martinez kept his nine daughters and two sons under his eye until he died. When he moved to the Rancho from the Presidio, his character seems to have mellowed. He gave many balls and dances for family and friends. When his oldest son Don Jose

de Jesus married a Peralta daughter festivities lasted for a week. There were bull fights, picnics and feats of horsemanship. Everyone was expected to dance and eat all the night long."

Don Jose retained control of El Pinole when Don Ignacio died, but his brother and sisters scattered. Doña Maria Antonia married a sea captain named Richardson.¹² Doña Francisca married Jose de los Santos Berryessa and moved to an adobe which stood at the east end of her father's Rancho where Martinez is now. This adobe was at the corner of Escobar and Smith Street, (Alhambra Ave.), and was frequently used for Martinez town meetings and public events before the first courthouse was built. Susana Martinez (for whom Susana Street in Martinez is named) was the daughter who had the most adventurous life. At an early age she married a merchant marine captain, William Hinckly, a successful navigator and smuggler. He died leaving her comfortable property in Yerba Buena.¹⁴

In 1848 she married Colonel William M. Smith, a former circus rider in Mexico and one of the founders of the town of Martinez. After Ignacio Martinez died, he acted as agent for the estate and laid out the first 120 acres of the town on the east side of Alhambra Creek. These lots were quickly sold and houses erected. William Heath Davis claimed that Colonel Smith was a dangerous man when the drink was in him; and though he "would assume the manner and air of a gentleman, through all, the superficial polish of the circus rider was discernable." In 1854, Smith committed suicide, being "fond of using his pistol."¹⁵ Alhambra Avenue was called Smith Street until the citizens of Martinez decided that the name was too common. After a sharp controversy, Martinez renamed the street after Alhambra Valley.¹⁶

Son Vincente Martinez built the two-story adobe in back of the Muir home which is now part of a national monument. Doña Encarnacion married late at the age of thirty-three. Why

she married at such an unusual age is still a mystery. Her husband was Abelino Altamirano, possibly the descendant of Justo Roberto Altamirano who came to California with Anza. Encarnacion has had a legend grow around her name. She was very beautiful and was noted for her gaiety and spirit when her family lived at the Presidio. The Altamiranos built an adobe in Alhambra Valley proper around 1849. Legend says that friends came from miles and assisted in building the structure amidst much partying. Encarnacion had no children and perhaps to pass the time away, she bought jewelry from the traveling peddler Simon Blum, on credit. This couldn't last forever and when Simon Blum foreclosed, the adobe and its lands were sold on the courthouse steps in Martinez for \$780."

The old Californians had no "head for money." They'd trade away land for groceries and waste property on bets." Their easy-going ways were no match for hard-headed business men like Simon Blum. Blum operated a real estate business, helped found the Bank of Martinez, had several stores and a group of warehouses. He built a large mansion in Martinez with twelve foot ceilings, parqueted floors and extensive gardens." The Mexicans soon were driven off their ranchos and the ranchos split up and sold to Americans rushing into California. Squatters abounded; men tried to buy Alhambra Valley land using civil war script. The legal problems were great. All served to push the old families out. The Mexicans moved into the towns, hired out as horsebreakers and generally were assimilated into the population of Americans.²⁰ It was a Briones, the blacksmith, who re-shod the horse of the first Pony Express rider through Martinez.²¹ Some people recall old Fernando Pacheco who weighed 350 pounds and had to have a support on his buggy for his stomach.²² The Mexicans remained but their lands were gone.

Rural Alhambra Valley in the late 1800s became the home of three men who were to become famous in three different



John Muir



Dr. John Strentzel

fields. All are considered fathers of their respective fields, and by coincidence, all were named John.

Our first father was Dr. John Strentzel, "the father of horticulture in California." He was a Pole who had left Lublin when the Russians came. Educated at the University of Buda-Pesth, he learned much about wine culture. Dr. Strentzel moved to Alhambra Valley in 1851 after living in New Orleans, Texas and various places about California. The following is an excerpt from an article taken from the *Contra Costa Gazette*, April 5, 1873, written by a *San Francisco Bulletin* reporter. It is entitled "County Jottings — Some of the sights that may be seen within thirty miles of the City.":

Half an hour's ride from Martinez, along the line of the road is the famous Alhambra Valley, the residence of Dr. John Strentzel, a Polish gentleman whose fruits are known at home and abroad. Twenty years since, he cleared forty acres building him a home. The romantic surroundings of the spot and the salubrity of the climate suited his fancy. He believed the valley had great possibilities and wished to demonstrate them. The road fairly winds into the valley. Every hill is of course a natural barrier to the winds. On the tops of the hills

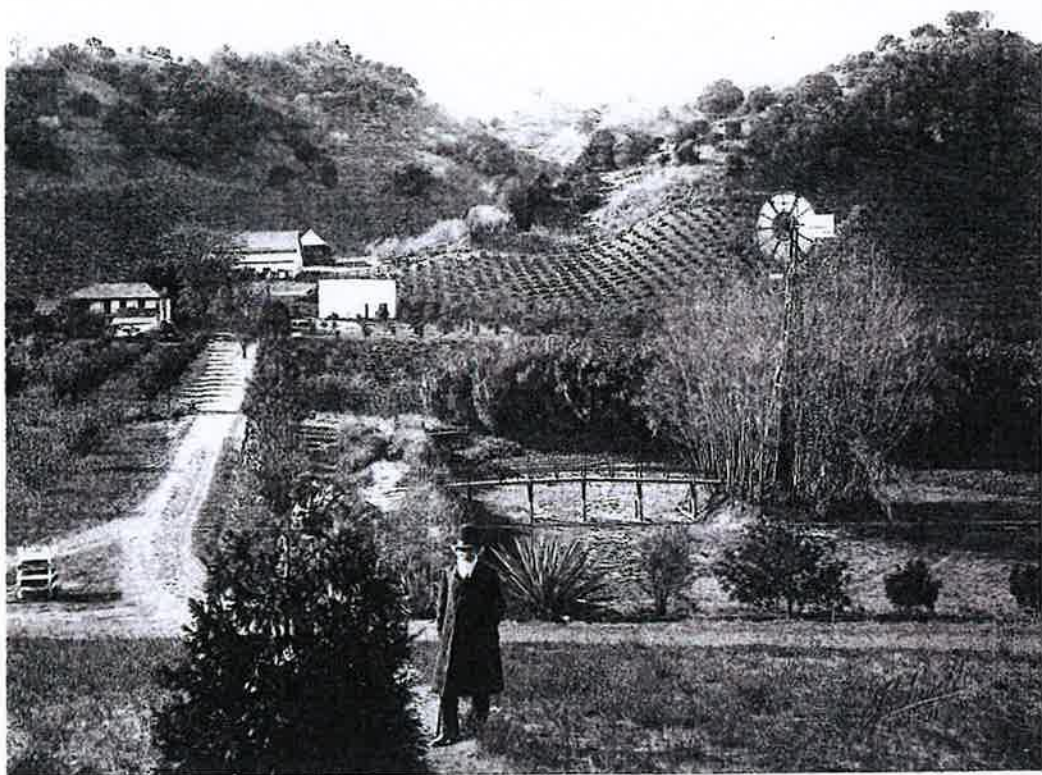
Simon Blum, enterprising pioneer peddler, merchant, Alhambra Valley land speculator and banker who figured in the early breakup and sale of Mexican ranchos.



the cold fogs rest. The valley is completely sheltered. Dr. Strentzel achieved a signal success. His fruit is as fine as any grown in the state. His house is fronted with an orchard of oranges and lemons. Colossal oranges, sweet, juicy oranges of several varieties; all growing in the open air. During the writer's visit Dr. Strentzel plucked oranges that had been on the trees for two years. These were fresh and sweet as ever. The rind had grown to a thickness of half an inch. Just think of it! An orange grove, in open air, within twenty miles in a direct line of San Francisco. The olive also grows to perfection in the Alhambra. The land under cultivation is enclosed by an osage orange hedge. One glance at the parlor tells the story. Culture and refinement hold sway in the household. Intelligence has wrung nature's riches from the land. Dr. Strentzel was satisfied of the generous character of the country, where he planted his first orange tree twenty years ago. He has good reason to be gratified with the result of his labors."ⁿ

Dr. Strentzel was not only a successful rancher but a skilled physician. When one of his Chinese workmen (the Chinese comprised the major work force before the Japanese came) split open his head, Dr. Strentzel pounded flat a soft silver Mexican coin and made a plate for the broken head."ⁿ

When the Strentzels first moved to Alhambra Valley they



Above, Dr. John Strentzel poses at his Valley ranch. The two-story Vincente Martinez Adobe is at left rear. The photo below illustrates how the Doctor built his home on a low hill rather than on flat land, a precaution reportedly taken from an unhappy experience in a flood.



shipped lumber around Cape Horn and built a small house amidst their orchards. Later in 1853 Dr. Strentzel built the big house now known as the Muir home.²⁵ He put a cupola on the top, probably to see if his workers were spending their time diligently.²⁶ Dr. Strentzel wrote papers on agriculture, was one of the founders of the Grange Business Association of Martinez, and was an accomplished botanist. Through his success with grafting, fruit orchards, and vineyards he is known as the "father of horticulture."²⁷ Dr. Strentzel's daughter, Louie Wanda, met and married John Muir, bringing our second father to Alhambra Valley.

John Muir, "father of our national parks"²⁸ married Louie Strentzel, April 14, 1880. Louie was a talented pianist and had been urged to go on stage but stayed on the Strentzel ranch keeping accounts and paying workers. A Mrs. Jeanne Car of Oakland was the matchmaker, writing to Louie about John: "I wish I could give him to some noble young woman 'for keeps' and so take him out of the wilderness into the society of his peers." Usually when Muir got wind or a whiff of matchmaking in the air he headed for the Sierras like any sensible bachelor, but this time he stayed, and married.²⁹ As a wedding present, Dr. Strentzel gave them the old house and twenty acres of land.³⁰ During the next ten years, Muir stayed in Alhambra Valley, renting and buying more land from his father-in-law. A successful rancher, Muir soon made his family secure and he could think about traveling again. He spent the next years wandering about the world and Louie seemed to understand his need to get away. She wrote to him that "Even your mother and sister would understand. My father and mother at last realize your need of the mountains. Then as for the ranch, why, it is here, and a few grapes more or less will not make a difference."³¹

When Dr. Strentzel died in 1890, the Muirs moved into the big house with Mrs. Strentzel. John Muir was a man who loved



John and Louie Muir with their daughters Wanda and Helen on the porch steps of their home, inherited from Dr. Strentzel. Photo taken about 1900.

nature, spending much time walking with his daughters in the hills above Alhambra Valley. He wrote in his journal: "Took a fragrant walk up the west hills with Wanda and Helen, who I am glad to see love walking, flowers, trees, and every bird and beast and creeping thing."³

John Muir wrote most of his books and articles in Alhambra Valley. After his wife died and his daughters moved away, Muir would stay writing in his study, an oasis of comfort in a large empty house." He died in Los Angeles in 1914 and is buried in the Strentzel plot on Alhambra Creek near the gigantic eucalyptus tree that was his favorite.⁴ John Muir did not mix

with valley folk much and consequently they did not have a chance to know him. They disapproved of his long absences. To them he seemed a sourdough vagrant, an early day free-thinker.³⁵ People who knew him though, knew him as a kindly, quiet intelligent man.³⁶

One day when John Muir was enjoying a buggy ride with his friend John Swett, he pointed out the Altamirano Adobe which at that time was owned by Mrs. Diedric White. John Swett liked the place and bought it as a summer home. It was then a ranch consisting of 171 acres which he named Hill Girt. Improvements were made and it became Swett's permanent home.

That was how Alhambra Valley got its third father. John Swett was Superintendent of Schools in San Francisco and is con-

John and Mary Swett in Alhambra Valley. The original picture bears the pencilled date of 1910 on the reverse side.





The Swett ranch, called the Hill Girt for being encircled by hills — and because no other suitable name could be agreed upon by the family — comprised 171 acres, mostly in fruit and wine grapes.

sidered “father of education in California.” He, John Muir and painter William Keith met when they planned a hike in the Sierras together. When Swett bought Hill Girt ranch, only the Altamirano Adobe was on it. Over the years he built a large home of nineteen rooms. It was in this house that John Muir lived two winters, often playing chess with John Swett’s son Frank.

The Swett ranch grew plums, peaches, pears, almonds, walnuts, apricots and cherries. Up to 1916 the important crop was wine grapes. Two occurrences caused the whole Valley to shift from grape culture to fruit orchards. The first of these was the Phylloxera, a tiny insect that destroyed the roots of the vines. This struck the Valley about the same time that it was



These two views of the Swett home span about a quarter-century. Note that in the newer photo (bottom), taken in the 1920s, that the fruit trees on the hill behind the house have been pulled out.



ruining French vineyards. All growers, if they could afford it, had to replant their vineyards by grafting Muskat, Tokay and other European stocks on a native American vine which was resistant to Phylloxera. The second occurrence was the Prohibition of 1916. John Swett had seen this coming and had integrated his vineyard with orchards, preparing to make the shift when Prohibition came.³⁷

John Swett would always walk when he could. He was usually seen wearing a black suit and walking with his hands behind his back.³⁸ He was very instrumental in founding Alhambra High School and since he was a trustee, would come on inspection tours of the school and lecture the students on education.³⁹ He would also give graduation talks.⁴⁰ He loved to talk with people and on summer nights would walk over to his neighbors and sit for hours on the steps conversing on everything.⁴¹

William Keith, the famous Californian landscape painter, was a good friend of the Muirs and Swetts. There is a story that Mrs. Keith (who was a relation to Ralph Waldo Emerson) brought some homemade root beer to the Swett's San Francisco home which when opened sprayed all over the ceiling. Keith said that he didn't have any money then, but that he would pay the Swetts back somehow. At Christmas, he brought over one of his paintings.⁴² Keith also had a yacht which he would sail up to Martinez from his studio in Oakland. John Muir up in his cupola would see him coming and would walk down to the wharf to meet him.⁴³

Joaquin Miller, famed Californian poet, also was a friend of Muir. He came to Martinez once and the town gave him a "doings." He recited one of his poems which seemed to the "lowbrows" to last forever and ever.⁴⁴

Alhambra Valley was now completely rural America. Until after World War II, it was composed of small farms. Fruit and cattle were the predominate crops. The usual farm size was



FACULTY—E. W. STODDARD, Principal; E. D. HALE, G. A. WILCOX, MISS L. H. FISH, MRS. WILCOX, MISS McMAHON, Music; MISS SHORT, Commercial
BOARD OF TRUSTEES—JOHN T. SWETT, M. R. JONES, MARTIN JOOST, THOS. DUANE, A. E. DUNKEL

The original Alhambra High School building in Martinez. Classes were held at this Susana Street location (present site of the Martinez Unified School District offices) from 1902 to 1921.

twenty to one hundred and fifty acres, the largest ranch, the "water ranch," was owned by the East Bay Water company.⁴⁵ The early wheat period in Contra Costa County never hit Alhambra Valley. The Valley was always in cattle, grapes and fruit. There weren't the vast quantities of grain grown as in other parts of the county. Every year the combines would come to each farm for a day to cut the small hay fields which provided fodder for cattle. The women would have to cook an enormous meal for the combine men.⁴⁶ Dairy cattle were the majority in the Valley. The Griffin farm had a dairy on it and Valley children would come over to see the cows milked. Most farms had a blacksmith, this being one of the most important occupations of the day.⁴⁷ Wages for hired men averaged about one dollar a day, less for Japanese. All the fruit of the Valley would be taken down to the train depot in Martinez, or the

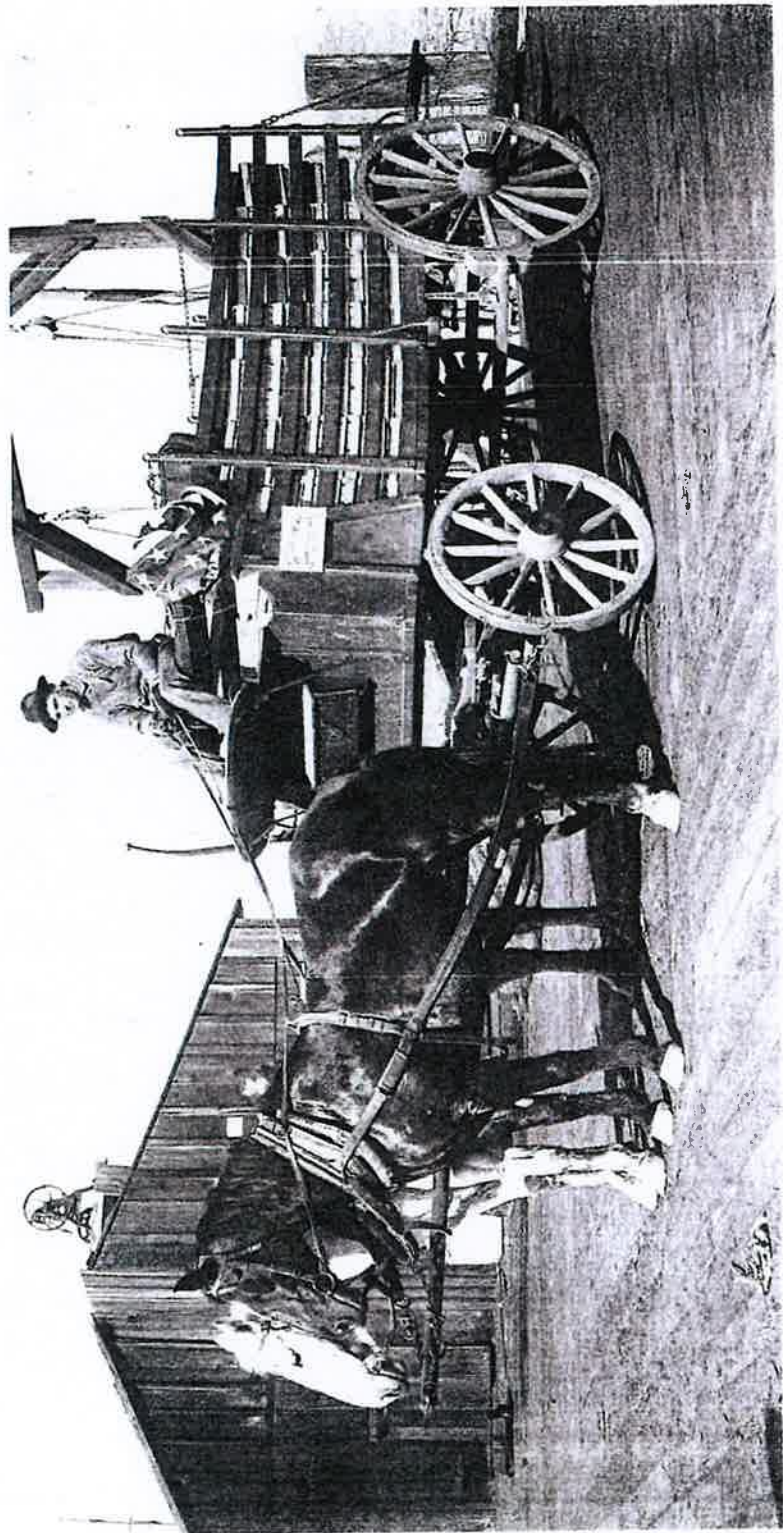


One of the county's first mechanical fruit tree sprayers at work on the Hill Girl Ranch, about 1910.

wharf. The long wharf, an Italian store midway, was where the packaged fruit was stacked, waiting for stern wheel steamers plying the delta between Sacramento, Stockton and Antioch, to take it to San Francisco.⁴⁸ These steamers remarkably resembled those on the Mississippi.⁴⁹

There were many fine old families who farmed in Alhambra Valley. The Uphams were one. They moved into the Valley from San Francisco.⁵⁰ The Tavan family was another. Joe Tavan had the "loudest voice in the Valley." It is said that he could be heard talking outside by someone in a house with all the doors and windows shut. Joe Tavan held land all over Martinez. He donated a room at the Community Hospital,⁵¹ gave money to both the Alhambra and Roman Catholic cemeteries in Martinez and donated \$500 a year scholarship money which is still being given at Alhambra High School today. ⁵²

An interesting person who lived in Alhambra Valley was Frederick K. Burnham, a wealthy "playboy" from the East. He was a big-game hunter and traveled around Africa and the rest of the world hunting.⁵³ It is said that he was a real sportsman



Horsepower brought Alhambra Valley's produce to the Martinez wharf from where it was shipped by steamer to San Francisco and other nearby ports. This rig was from the Sweet's ranch. The driver is John T. Palmer, who became constable and police chief of Martinez.



Joe Tavan in his confirmation suit. He was a Valley land owner, philanthropist and winemaker.

who always gave the animal a chance, never taking advantage of one. He bred race horses and had a training track.³⁴ He had one of the first cars in the Valley (there were only two or three). With his large, long, grey sports car, he almost ran down the Griffins, and George Griffin forever after considered him a worthless person.³⁵ He had a monkey named Molly who had the run of his house. Valley children loved to visit her. Mr. Burnham was also a good friend of Zane Grey, western novel writer. They had adjoining cabins on the Rogue River. The Burnham house was carpeted with skins and many heads of bagged animals hung on the walls, so it was a great loss when the house burned.³⁶

During the fire, one could hear the corks popping in the cellar. This was during Prohibition.⁵⁷

Beverly Richard Holliday, a Valley resident, was a 49er who had come to California in a covered wagon. He was the first teacher at the new Martinez school. His first class in 1850 consisted of six students. His son, William, was another pioneer horticulturalist who had much success with Bartlett pears.⁵⁸

In Alhambra Valley, as in all rural areas, lived many strongly individual people, pioneers set in their ways. Charlie Bumgartner was one of these. He never took a bath and lived well without working. Every spring he would be taken by an urge to climb Mt. Diablo. On the way to the mountain he would pass through Alhambra Valley, often stopping to talk at the Griffin farm. On one of these trips, he fell and broke his leg, making it necessary for him to go to the hospital in Martinez. There, they gave him his first bath in years and he died of pneumonia from it.⁵⁹

Lawrence Jones was a man "very fond of liquor." He had a wonderful cure for poison oak, a clearish white liquid which really worked. He would tell his secret to no one, so the formula went with him to the grave.⁶⁰

Crazy Martinez was another drunkard. If when coming down Alhambra Valley Road, people heard singing, they became very wary and proceeded with caution.⁶¹

Billy BeDamned lived in Martinez. He could carry anything on a flat tray which he balanced on his head.⁶²

John Alexander was a "crazy bootlegger." He would come to the Griffin place and talk and talk. In those days men would always sit outside while women would enter the house. When Alexander was invited in to have a bit of supper, he would refuse saying that he had to leave. He wouldn't leave though; he would stay on and talk some more while the Griffin dinner grew colder and colder.⁶³



The Griffin family, forebears of one of the authors, are shown here on their ranch which spanned Alhambra Creek. They are standing at the old bridge on what is now Reliez Valley Road.

In rural Alhambra Valley there were many traveling peddlers. Spice, fish, vegetable, trinket peddlers and knife sharpeners would work their way through the Valley.⁴ Tramps would come through often, sometimes stopping at the Holliday farm. There, they would be allowed to sleep in the barn if they'd "turn in their matches."

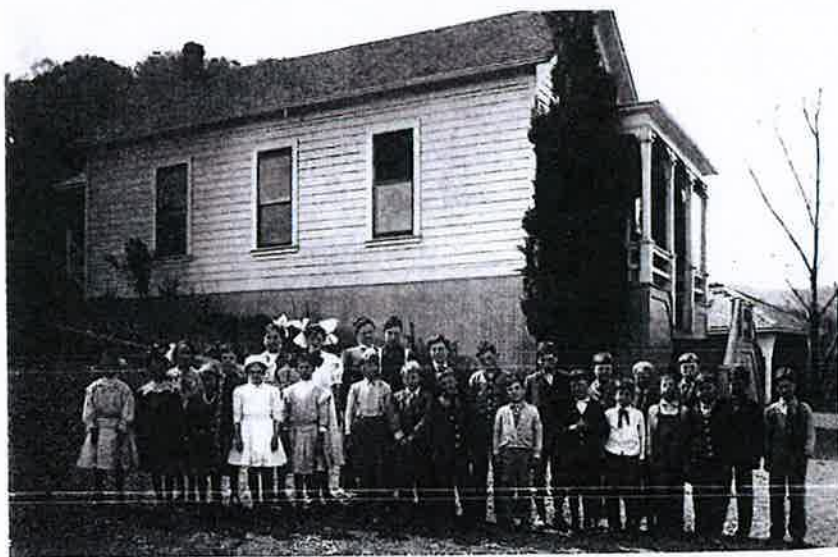
Things back in rural America were very simple. No one ever thought of using keys and locks.⁵ Light came from oil lamps, heat from the fireplace, food was preserved in iceboxes supplied by the two ice factories in Martinez, cooking was done over a wood stove and the only hot water available came from pipes running through the fire box.⁶ Everyone in and around Martinez had a well. Martinez is on an area of thousands of springs. Some were alkali, used for irrigation, most were of

drinkable water. Hundreds of windmills whirled above the town.⁶⁷

Alhambra Valley farmers subsisted on credit. There was very little hard money. Even more credit was given than today.⁶⁸ Barter and trade were extensively used. Farmers would take in the eggs to Lasell's General Store and get in exchange a sack of flour.⁶⁹ Farm children would stay on the farms, but in Martinez, jobs were scarce so many boys moved to San Francisco or Oakland. Industry in Martinez opened up new jobs. One of the first industries was the Bullshead oil works.⁷⁰

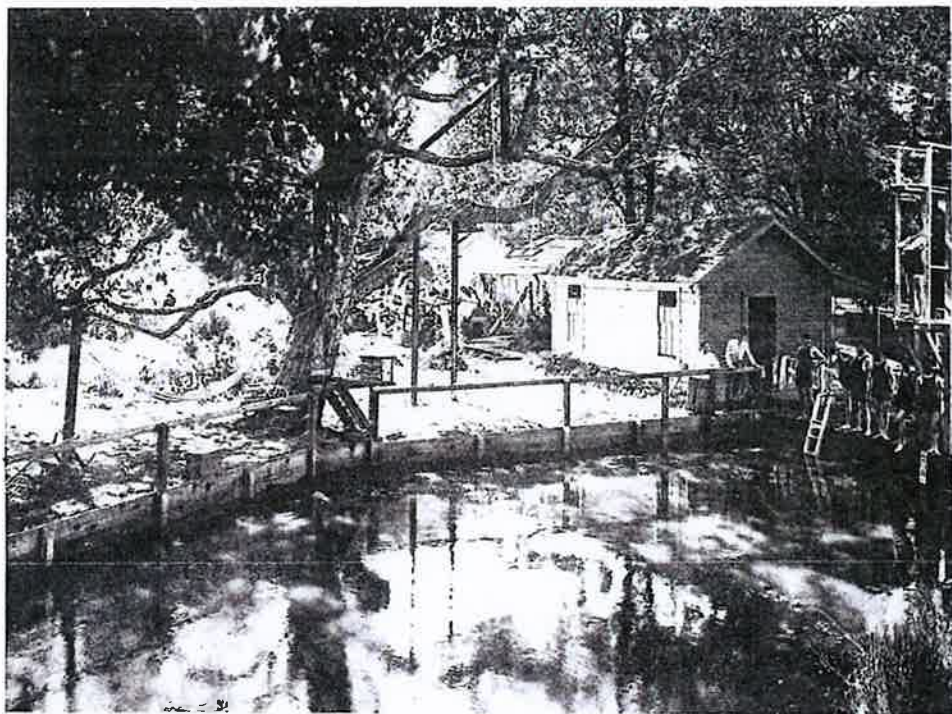
The Valley got its medical service from Martinez or relied on home cures. Dr. Brenamen had the first car in the area, a Rambler which greatly speeded his house calls.⁷¹ If people did get sick, castor oil and calomel were used to great extent. One had to beware of eating an acid after taking calomel because the mixture of the two would cause teeth to drop out.⁷²

The Alhambra School student body of 1913. Teacher Annie B. Johnson (center, back row) taught 26 youngsters in the school's single room.



All the Valley children went to the Alhambra School house until Martinez built its school. The Alhambra School was a one-room building with one teacher for all eight grades.⁷³ Children came from the Valley and even from outside the Valley to attend this school. The original school house burned and another was built. This eventually became a Farm Bureau and a 4-H Club. There was not much social life. Family groups stayed together and minded their own business.⁷⁴ Such socializing as there was took place either at the Alhambra School house or in Martinez. The four churches in town (Congregational, Methodist, Episcopal and Catholic) held many socials for the youth. For dancing and roller skating there was a large pavilion on the hill above Martinez which held four hundred people. Dances were common which lasted until two o'clock with a midnight feast consisting of sandwiches and cake.⁷⁵ Every Friday night was a band concert. Also, nearly every one had a boat. There was much boating and swimming at the wharf.⁷⁶ When a circus came to town, or a Nigger Minstrel Show, everyone would turn out in crowds.⁷⁷ Two days a year, Decoration Day and the Fourth of July, were the largest celebrations. Everyone would come into town and listen to speeches at Alhambra Cemetery by long-winded lawyers. Then everyone would have a grand picnic.⁷⁸

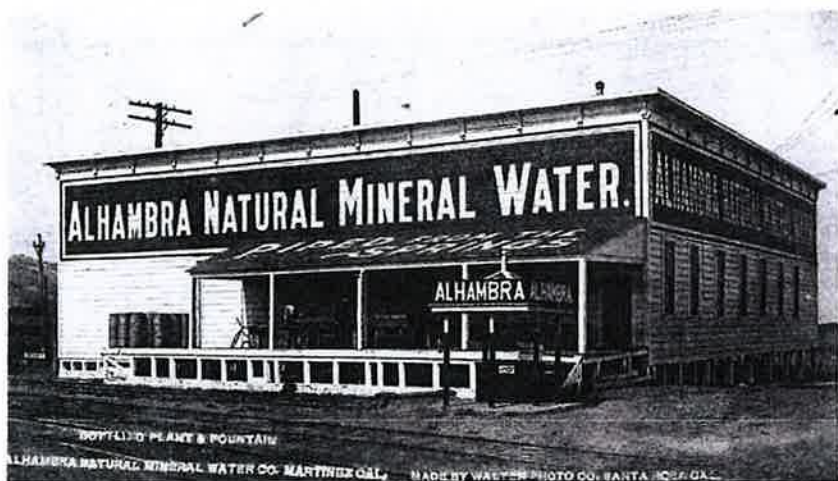
People in the Valley could always hunt for recreation. There were coyotes, squirrels, rabbits, skunks, raccoons. The elk, deer, grizzly and puma had already been hunted out. (Since then the deer have come back.) People went to San Francisco about once a year — as a special vacation. Since Martinez was a very small town, the social stratas were distinctly defined. Everyone knew who were the "top five hundred."⁷⁹ Martinez people saw Alhambra and Briones Valleys as places to picnic.⁸⁰ Also, the "thing" for graduating Alhambra High School seniors to do was to come out to the Valley and steal fruit from Alhambra Valley ranches.



This was the posh Glorietta Swimming Club on the Upham Ranch. The pool was fed by an adjacent creek and boasted two diving boards and an overhead swing, the latter suspended precariously from a tree limb.

Industry in Alhambra Valley was limited to wineries, a cider mill and resorts. There were three wineries, the largest belonging to the Swetts. The Coltons had a small winery and so did the Tavans. Joe Tavan would drive his large wagon to Martinez filled with casks of different kinds of wine. People would run out with jars, kegs and pots and Joe would ask them what kind of wine they wanted. They would answer and he would siphon out wine from the appropriate cask."

The Upham family had an apple orchard and a cider mill. The market for this cider was county wide. Every year they would have a party where everyone could drink all the cider he wanted. The children in the valley would all be sick the next day.⁸⁷ The Uphams also ran the Glorietta Swimming Club. Many Martinez families belonged to this club. The "swimming



The Alhambra Natural Mineral Water Co. sold its famous "pure springs" water from this plant, across from the Southern Pacific Railroad depot in Martinez. A pipe connection loaded tank cars for delivery to other company plants in San Francisco and Oakland.

hole" was made by damming up a creek. Every possible afternoon after school, teenagers would ask for the team or surrey and go out to the club. Girls had long hair in those days and on the way home it would dry behind them in the wind."

The Alhambra Springs Resort at the west end of the Valley was a popular county resort. People came from all over the Bay Area to bathe in and drink its mineral and sulphur waters. The sulphur water was an affirmed cure for rheumatism. The Resort had a pavilion, a piano and plenty of rooms for vacationers. The property was bought about 1900 by L. M. Lasell who saw its potential as a bottled water source. The property comprised 300 acres. In 1905 a two inch galvanized pipeline was laid from the springs to a bottling plant across from the depot in Martinez. The pipeline was six miles long and cost \$9000.00. The surplus water was piped into tankcars and taken to bottling plants in Oakland and San Francisco where it was put into five

gallon jars which were sold all over the bay area. The official name for this water was "Alhambra Pure Springs Water." The sulphur water was also sold bottled as a cure. The water was extracted from the springs by tunnelling up to one hundred feet into the side of the hills. The Alhambra Water Company stopped using the springs about ten years ago. Even though the water level of the whole state has been dropping, the springs still run."

The last and most famous resort was above Alhambra Valley in Vaca Canyon. This was the Ferndale resort. It was renowned all over Northern California. There were baths, a hotel, mineral springs, shade trees and pure water. People came from miles to vacation here. A surrey would pick up vacationers at the Southern Pacific depot in Martinez and take them to their holiday at Ferndale."

Rural Alhambra Valley was relatively free of disasters. The earthquake of 1868 caused more damage than the more famous one of 1906. The shake of 1868 knocked down adobes and changed springs." The 1906 earthquake fairly demolished the Bank of California in Martinez, moved windmills and stairs and a water tank at the Griffin farm. In the courthouse rotunda it knocked over the pickled fruits and vegetables that had won prizes at previous fairs. When the prisoners of the Martinez jail found out about this alcohol, they drank it eagerly. Unfortunately, it was the right kind of alcohol for preserving, but the wrong kind for drinking and all the prisoners had to be taken to the hospital where a few died."

In 1922, a snow storm struck the area. People played in it, grown men threw snowballs at cars on Main Street. In Alhambra Valley eight inches of snow fell.

The Great Depression of 1930 had little effect on the area because most people in the Valley were almost self-sufficient; money was rare even before the depression."

Political feeling was very strong in the Valley. Conventions

were held even for county offices. In Contra Costa County, the Republicans always won. Everyone was concerned with and everyone believed in politics."

Violence in Alhambra Valley was rare. Most fights were disputes over water rights, springs, or boundary lines. There was no thievery.⁹⁰ However, San Francisco gamblers did set up shop in Martinez. They especially liked to prey upon the Japanese workers who had no place to spend their money. The "Boss-Jap" Arii, at the Swett ranch was the avowed enemy of these sharks and tried to convince his workers to save their money. One of these gamblers got drunk one night and came out to the Swett ranch threatening to kill Arii. He advanced on Arii but Arii shot and killed him first. Then he headed for the hills. Frank Swett procured a lawyer who successfully had Arii exonerated on the grounds of self-defense. After the trial, Arii brought Frank Swett a big bag of coins and tried to pay him.

Alhambra Valley's great snow storm of 1922 (Martinez, eight inches) gave rise to "miniature armies gathered in the streets for snowball fights," according to one newspaper account. This photo was taken at the upper end of Green Street, Martinez.



Of course, Swett wouldn't take his money but Arii insisted that "the man on the throne" must have cost a lot of money. Swett sent him away without paying and Arii was eternally grateful.

There is one more story of "murder" in the Valley. Back in old Californian days, there was a picnic-rodeo near the junction of Alhambra Valley Road and Reliez Valley Road and two Mexicans grew angry at each other. One lassoed the other by the neck and rode off dragging him up into the Briones Hills."

The two world wars affected Alhambra Valley. During World War I, Valley residents collected peach and apricot pits and took them down to the depot where they were shipped off eventually to be made into cyanide gas. When the war's end was announced, Mrs. David Muir, John Muir's sister-in-law, ran up and down Alhambra Valley Road beating on a dishpan."

Before World War II there were more than 4,000 Japanese in Contra Costa County." During 1941 they were all moved out by the army. These people lost everything. They were very good workers and in Alhambra Valley necessary workers. When they were uprooted, all the orchards and ranchers in the Valley suffered. Valley Japanese weren't interested in Imperial Japan, but in growing pears. They had their own school on land given to them by John Swett. After attending Martinez schools in the morning, Japanese children would go to their own school at night.

With the Japanese gone, other workers were needed. The Swett ranch first hired a band of gypsies who were good workers but drank and sang all night. The gypsies had to go when they decided that the prune orchard was haunted and wouldn't pick the plums. Next came a group of Negroes who promptly set their quarters on fire by building too large a fire under the Japanese bathtubs. They had to go also. Last came Mexicans who were very good workers but couldn't speak English, forcing the Swetts to carry a Spanish-English dictionary about.

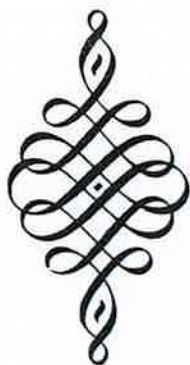
Every year the Swetts would hire woodcutters. These people would work all day and then drink themselves to sleep. Fred Tracy, a cousin of the Swetts, took some flour, some water and a gun and headed for the woodcutters' camp. As they were all sound asleep, he sprinkled them with water and dusted them with flour and then fired his gun. The woodcutters woke up, saw each other as eerie white images and immediately concluded that there were ghosts in the Valley. This was Alhambra Valley's only haunting, excepting the gypsies, of course."

The end of World War II signalled the beginning of the end of rural Alhambra Valley. Business boomed and people moved into California in droves. Cities spread slowly across the land, gobbling up orchards, farms and history. In Alhambra Valley, the farms and ranches began to subdivide. The Bartlett pear orchards lost place to private homes.

As rural Alhambra Valley disappears, the feeling of togetherness, of everyone knowing everyone else, the simple life, the individual life, is disappearing also. Mrs. Margaret Plummer, a granddaughter of John Swett, has said that she doesn't mind the onslaught of urban America because people have to live somewhere, but she hopes that Alhambra Valley won't lose its beauty under a sea of houses. She would like each house to be on at least a half acre of land. We agree with her completely. We feel that the history and the beauty of the Valley shouldn't be lost because of some house contractor's desire for profit.

Today, Alhambra Valley has one vineyard, several fruit orchards, and a few vegetable patches. Alhambra Valley in recent times has been the home of a California State Senator, and is the winter home of a circus. We hope that on the grounds of beauty and of history, Alhambra Valley will not be inundated by today's "ticky-tacky" houses, but will retain its rural-

ness and remain forever "fertile and picturesque in its fringes of evergreen oaks and dots of cottages white, and life in toiling, happy man and useful beast."



NOTES

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39. Mrs. Bray.
40. Mr. & Mrs. Johnson.
41. Interview with Dr. Alice Potter, San Francisco, April 25, 1970.
42. Mrs. Plummer.
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44. Mr. & Mrs. Johnson.
45. Mr. Griffin.
46. Interview with Mrs. Ivan J. Girgich, Orinda, April 25, 1970.
47. Mrs. Plummer.
48. Mrs. Weaver.
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54. Mrs. Bray.
55. Mr. Griffin.
56. Mrs. Plummer.
57. Mr. Griffin.
58. Mrs. Weaver.
59. Mrs. Girgich.
60. Mr. & Mrs. Johnson.

NOTES

61. Dr. Potter.
62. Mrs. Bray.
63. Mrs. Girgich.
64. Dr. Potter.
65. Mrs. Weaver.
66. Dr. Potter.
67. Mrs. Bray.
68. Mr. & Mrs. Johnson.
69. Dr. Potter.
70. Mr. & Mrs. Johnson.
71. Mrs. Plummer.
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91. Mrs. Plummer.
92. Mrs. Girgich.
93. Mrs. Bray.
94. Mrs. Plummer.

— INTERVIEWS —

Mrs. Justice A. F. Bray, Daughter of R. R. Veale, Sheriff of Contra Costa County 1895-1935.

Mr. Thomas H. Griffin, Son of George Griffin, Valley pioneer.

Mrs. Ivan J. Girgich, Daughter of George Griffin.

Mr. Harrison Johnson, Longtime Martinez resident, born in Alhambra Valley.

Mrs. Harrison Johnson, Martinez resident since 1905.

Mr. Ernest R. Lasell, Son of L. M. Lasell, owner of Alhambra Natural Mineral Water Co., Lasell's General Store, etc.

Mrs. Margaret Swett Plummer, Granddaughter of John Swett.

Dr. Alice Potter, Past resident of Alhambra Valley and Martinez.

Mrs. Charles Holliday Weaver, Granddaughter of B. R. Holliday, pioneer and first school teacher in Martinez.

Mrs. Thomas Sharman, Present resident of the Altamirano Adobe.

Mr. Peter Griffin, History major at University of California.

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*ABOUT
THE
AUTHORS*

Both authors are well grounded on the subject which they write — they live there. Monty Lindstrom and Robert Griffin reside in Alhambra Valley, the former in a house built on what was once a part of the historic John Swett Ranch, and the latter on the remaining land of a 300-acre ranch founded in 1868 by Thomas Griffin, who is Robert's great-grandfather.

In another similarity, both authors are students of Alhambra High School where they are giving a marked regard to the disciplines of writing and history. This brief account, in fact, is a jointly produced term paper for a United States History course at the school.

Like most young men, Lindstrom and Griffin have many interests. Lindstrom is inquiring into literature, herb culture and anthropology, while Griffin gives attention to music, gastronomy and oenology.