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A snapshot in time

By Vera Kochan

Back in 1945, for a brief moment in history, the Moraga Valley was under consideration as the permanent location of the United Nations.

In June of that year, San Francisco held the first meeting of the United Nations in the Memorial Opera House where the U.N. Charter was approved by 50 nations and signed the next day at the War Memorial Veterans Building. The event was attended by nearly 5,000 delegates, aides, interpreters and reporters.

A major topic among attendees was to find a permanent home for the U.N. At that time, San Francisco had a population of less than one million and had put its best foot forward during the festivities, making the Bay Area an attractive possibility. The Presidio was a top choice, but running a close second was the Moraga Valley, the Berkeley Hills or Orinda. News reports at the time predicted that the U.N. headquarters would be "the capital of the world."

The Bay Area bid was supported by Australia, China, El Salvador, India and Saudi Arabia, to name a few. However, Great Britain and the Soviet Union had objections to San Francisco. While the British delegate, Kenneth Younger, loved the city, scenery and people, he didn't like the bridge tolls or the Presidio's architecture. George S. Saksin, the Soviet delegate, felt that San Francisco was too far to fly, "I can't understand the attempt to chase us into this hole."

Even the Secretary of State, Edward Stettinius, pushed for San Francisco because of "the golden sunshine and the fresh and invigorating air of the Pacific."

The Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors thought it was a great idea to bring the U.N. to the Moraga Valley. They created a committee that included real estate developers and local members of Congress who tried to convince the United Nations delegates that while San Francisco was a wonderful city, there wasn't enough room to build a site big enough for the headquarters.

The Moraga Valley, in today's Burton Valley area of Lafayette, could offer thousands of acres to build on, a mild climate, room for cultural development, recreation and close proximity to San Francisco, airports, UC Berkeley and Saint Mary's College.

Fifty cities throughout the United States did their best to attract the U.N. committee, including Boston and New York. Not to be outdone, the Contra Costa Development Association came up with \$2,500 to print an impressive 24-page book showing aerial views of Moraga and the Bay Area.

In the fall of 1946, the U.N. committee announced that they would be coming to the Bay Area to check out the proposed sites, allowing for a restricted amount of time to tour each one. San Francisco's mayor, George Lapham, was criticized for taking up too much of the committee's time, thereby shortening Moraga's presentation bid from 30 minutes to eight minutes. Judge A.F. Bray, acting as spokesman for Contra Costa Development managed to speak for 15 minutes before being cut off. The U.N. committee felt that Moraga was too far from San Francisco and that the Presidio would make a better choice.

According to retired Joaquin Moraga Intermediate School's librarian and former Moraga Historical Society archivist, Elsie Mastick, "It was such a short and disappointing time in Moraga's history. We don't have too much information or any pictures." She added, "In the end, Rockefeller and his money took the U.N. from California."

John D. Rockefeller, Jr. offered the United Nations committee \$8.5 million to purchase real estate in Manhattan, while the city of New York donated additional land, effectively dashing the hopes of bringing the world to Lamorinda.

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