

~ Life in LAMORINDA ~

Moraga Ranch – An unofficial town landmark



Moraga Ranch manager's office for Utah Construction and barns

Photos Vera Kochan

By Vera Kochan

With a history dating back to 1914, the red and white cluster of buildings along Moraga's School Street has become an unofficial landmark in the town. The first influential property owner was James Irvine from Southern California. The city of Irvine in Orange County bears his name.

Irvine's land purchase of more than 5,000 acres became The Moraga Company where agribusiness flourished from small farms to large-scale ranching and orchards. Irvine ran his empire much like a taskmaster. Tenant farmers were no longer allowed the freedom to use their land as they chose, but rather had to comply with his wishes.

Sharecroppers were instructed to plant peaches, corn, pumpkins, beets, tomatoes and beans. The Moraga Company's two most productive crops were walnuts and pears.

The Moraga Ranch and its buildings became a community unto itself. Employing nearly 150 workers during the peak planting and harvest seasons, while the remainder of the year offered jobs to ap-

proximately 45 workers to keep the ranch running during winter months.

Modern-day Moraga Ranch's well-known red buildings with white trims were not the original color scheme. Although no one is quite certain what the original color of the exterior buildings were, early photographs hint of an unpainted façade. Photos dating back to the 1940s and 1950s begin to suggest the appearance of the current coloring.

The ranch complex contained a variety of buildings and services to accommodate the needs of the small army of employees who worked the land. A cookhouse and commissary, cooler and mess hall, garage, blacksmith, carpenter shop, barns and stables, bunkhouses and bathing facilities were all located on site. A firehouse and an office were also part of the many buildings located within the small village. A walnuthulling shed is also still located across Moraga Way near the corner of School Street.

In August 1947, Irvine passed away while on a fishing trip in Montana. In 1953, trustees of his estate nearly

sold the Moraga Ranch to Donald and Richard Rheem, who would only agree to the sale if all of The Moraga Company's stock was included in the deal. One lone stockholder refused to sell his shares, thereby halting the purchase.

By the end of the year, Ed Wallace of Wallace Real Estate Company from Orinda was able to convince the stubborn stockholder to sell his shares in a deal that saw the entire holdings of The Moraga Company sold to Utah Construction and Mining Company.

Over the course of Utah's ownership, plans to turn the expansive acreage into subdivisions began; however the original Moraga Ranch buildings remained untouched.

The Moraga Ranch was destined to see yet another owner in 1964 when Utah sold it, and the 108 acres that would also include the Moraga Shopping Center, to Russell J. Bruzzone.

In the 1970s and 1980s Moraga Ranch buildings located along School Street included retail shops. Businesses such as Moraga Ranch Craftworks, Orinda Ballet, Moraga Food Company, Cook House Café, Country Store Antiques and Slick Chick Shoe & Shirt Shop occupied the edifices that once used to house the day-to-day workings of a bustling ranch and farm. Now known as the Ranch House Café, the former Cook House Café is the only remaining business still in operation.

The bright red and white buildings that once made up the heart of a bygone era when Moraga contained only a smattering of farm houses, yet produced a mighty haul of walnuts and pears, still evoke a feeling of nostalgia and pride in this town's roots.

(Research information provided by The Moraga Historical Society, Susan Sperry and Mrs. Joan Bruzzone.)



Worker bath house and toilets



Old firehouse building became Country Store Antiques shop

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