

# ~ Life in LAMORINDA ~

## Moraga's 2020 Pear & Wine Festival another COVID-19 casualty



Photo Vera Kochan

The few remaining pear trees from the Moraga Company's once vast orchards.

### By Vera Kochan

Traditionally held the fourth Saturday in September, the town's annual Pear & Wine Festival fell victim to coronavirus social distancing mandates. The festival signals the beginning of the fall season to Moragans whose town symbol is a green Bartlett pear.

The pear (*pyrus communis* -- meaning common pear) belongs to the rose family (*rosaceae*). The USA Pears website declares that pears were called "a gift of the gods" by the Greek poet Homer. The California Pear Advisory Board states, "The Bartlett pear got its start in 17th Century England, originally known as the Williams pear before crossing the Atlantic with the early colonists. Nurseryman Enoch Bartlett of Massachusetts, unaware of the pear's true name, began distributing the variety under his own name in 1812, and it quickly became America's favorite." Most townsfolk know

the immediate 100-year history regarding the existence of pear orchards in Moraga. Planted by James Irvine in 1913 for his Moraga Company, a ranch and agribusiness nearly 11,000 acres in size, the crops also included walnuts, apples, peaches, apricots, beans and beets.

Sold under the name Moraga Pears, the fruit was the largest pear operation in the state between 1914 and 1944 and became world famous. According to former Moraga Historical Society archivist Elsie Mastick, "It was the largest distribution of pears in the world." Trains came through town loading up on fruit that would be destined for the East Coast and beyond, as well as local canneries such as Del Monte in Oakland.

According to information gathered from the MHS, when Utah Mining and Construction bought the 5,000 acres of pear orchards in 1953 only 150 acres of pear trees re-

mained. More trees were cut down and replaced by shopping centers and subdivisions. By 1974, pear harvests were discontinued and the remaining trees were left standing untended. Of the original 38 pear orchards, only a handful of trees still remain.

Today a few lucky Moraga homeowners can say with pride, "I have a Moraga Company pear tree still bearing fruit in my backyard." This reporter is one of them.

The annual Pear Festival began in 1999 by then-Moraga residents Tom and Stephanie Smith. By 2003, Moraga Parks Foundation took the helm. Once a pear tree is planted, it can produce fruit for nearly 200 years. That's good news for the town of Moraga, which can look forward to a Pear & Wine Festival at least through the year 2113.

*Note: Additional research for this article provided by MHS President Susan Sperry.*

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