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The Moraga Barn - over 100 years of history in one building

By Vera Kochan



Sacramento Northern freight train arrives in front of Moraga "Bar" in the 1950s Photo courtesy Moraga Historical Society

There's a question mark when it comes to The Moraga Barn. When was it built? The Moraga Historical Society has documentation that alludes to 1911, but several other sources claim the building was constructed in 1914. The MHS archives contain a Moraga Sun newspaper article from the 1990s, with a photo showing Helen Sanders pouring drinks at the bar with a sign behind her that reads: "Est. 1911, Moraga Barn, Prop. T. Sanders." There's no explanation as to why so many accounts tout 1914 as the date that Robert Noble Burgess, a partner in the Moraga Land and Water Company, first built a structure that was initially named Moraga Hotel.

The hotel had five bedrooms on the top floor, and each came with a washstand and shower. The main floor, the lobby, was two stories high and the hotel was intended to serve passengers and personnel who came through town on the Oakland, Antioch & Eastern Railway and stopped at the train station across the street. In later years the upper floor was converted to an apartment and a middle floor was added.

In 1915-1916, John Fleuti bought the building and turned it into a general store. Six years later, Fleuti's daughter, Helen Hetfield, before she married John Smart, moved into town to manage the store that became Moraga Mercantile. Besides groceries that included meat and dry goods, hardware and drugs were also stocked. Customers were mostly grain, hay, and dairy ranchers from the Moraga Valley. Eventually the store would also become a voter registration office, post office, telephone exchange and soda fountain.

The Moraga Barn was not immune to the law during Prohibition. A December 1927, Contra Costa Gazette headline almost screamed the following news: "BOOZE FOUND IN MORAGA P.O." According to the article, the location "was raided last night by the prohibition squad, and a quantity of wine and whiskey confiscated including a case or more of whiskey said to be of pre-war distillation." Fleuti was taken into custody "where he pleaded guilty and paid a fine of \$500 for possession of liquor and an additional \$100 for operating a slot machine."

The article continues, "Fleuti's son-in-law, the late John Smart, was formerly connected with the federal prohibition enforcement office until he retired to engage in business in Moraga with his father-in-law. Several years ago a moonshine still, said by the Contra Costa authorities to have been the property of Fleuti, was confiscated in the Moraga hills, but there was no further prosecution."

During the raid, prohibition officers, who had their eyes on Moraga Mercantile for several months, claimed to have found 300 gallons of wine in the basement of the store/post office/telephone exchange building along with 100 gallons of "jackass whiskey."

When prohibition ended in 1933, Hetfield/Smart stated in a 1966 Moraga Sun interview, "We served beer at first, and gradually the beverage department grew." The grocery and drug counters were moved to one side until the demand for them stopped completely. For over 20 years after, the building was known as Moraga Bar. When a new state law prohibited the use of the word "bar" on the outside of structures, "we simply went out and added "N," explained Hetfield/Smart. That's how a building that never was a barn got its name.

The Moraga Barn's original street address was 1002 Viader Dr., which was intended to be located on Moraga's "main street." During a blink-and-you-miss-it moment, the building went by the name of Moraga Inn according to a 1957 advertisement that boasted "an assortment of beverages" and was located in the "center of a metropolis opposite the railroad depot."

From the 1970s through the 1990s, The Moraga Barn had seen its share of visits from the Moraga Police Department, called to break up bar fights or investigate reports of serving liquor to minors. In an October 1990 article titled, "Minor `Barn Storming' Attracts MPD," then proprietor Todd Sanders said, referring to his Saint Mary's College clientele, "We love the student crowd, but we are being watched very closely by the Moraga police this year. They have the power to make things difficult for us . and the students. They have been in already and said they will crack down on us this year."

In the early 1990s, The Moraga Barn offered half price lunches or dinners thanks to coupons residents received in the mail. These coupons stated: "Temporarily. no one under 21 allowed in." Items such as barbecue pork ribs, prime rib or "armadillo chicken" were on the menu, along with umbrella drinks and fine wine. They were open every day, catered events, and offered take-out. Sadly, this extra effort to get customers in the door was not working, and Sanders would eventually face financial troubles resulting in its 1995 closure.

Not even the Moraga Historical Society's effort to turn The Moraga Barn into a historical landmark on July 4, 1994 with a dedication ceremony, could keep the property solvent, and in 1997, with no one interested in purchasing the building, the bank lowered the asking price from \$225,000 to \$199,000. It was eventually purchased with the hopes of turning The Moraga Barn into a bar and grill, but cost estimates for renovations came to \$750,000 and parking restrictions weren't conducive to the new owner's plans.

By 2006, The Moraga Barn went through complete renovations and an address change to 925 Country Club Dr., when Canyon Construction Company bought the property for office use, and in order to comply with property line codes had to move the building approximately five feet.

The Moraga Barn continues its new incarnation as a building that houses offices with current owner Greg Gaskin, of Gaskin Wealth Management, who's been there since 2016. The designation as a Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) platinum certified structure, made so by the previous owners, has brought the building up to "green" standards, and according to the company's Michelle Marcucci, they have been approached by a winery asking to bottle their grapes which grow on the premises. Between the grapes and the fact that Gaskin has also rented out the grounds as a private event venue, one might say that The Moraga Barn has made a gentle full circle to the good old days.

Special thanks to Moraga Historical Society's president Susan Sperry, archivist Bonnie Krames and member Sam Sperry.

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