Janet Newton

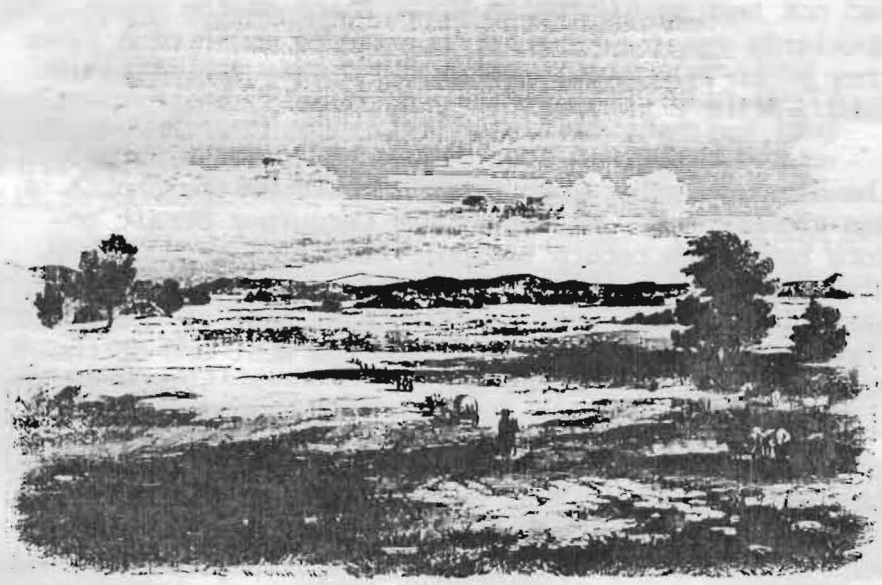
A BRIEF HISTORY

OF

LIVERMORE

BY

JANET NEWTON



LIVERMORE'S VALLEY.

Sketch made by Army survey team in 1853.

LIVERMORE HERITAGE GUILD
LIVERMORE, CALIFORNIA
SEPTEMBER, 1979

BRIEF HISTORY OF THE LIVERMORE VALLEY

The first written records of the Livermore Valley were made by an exploring party from the Spanish Expedition Santa of 1769. Father Junipero Serra and the soldier Gaspar de Portola arrived in what is now San Diego in that year from New Spain (now Mexico). Their orders were to proceed up the coast to Point Reyes, a landmark long known from the sea but never explored by land.

The explorers found that the land route northward was blocked by the Golden Gate. This geographic feature had not been visible from small ships on the ocean. The Spaniards reasoned that if it was the mouth of a river they might find a way across it if they travelled inland.

Accordingly, in 1772, the soldier Pedro Fages and the diarist Father Juan Crespi, followed the shores of San Francisco Bay as far as the Carquinez Strait before having to return to their base camp at Monterey. Always exploring, they took a different route southward so that they went down the east side of the hills through what is now Danville and the west end of the Livermore Valley towards Sunol.

The next European visitors came in 1776 when the great explorer Juan Bautista de Anza and the equally famous Father Pedro Font made another attempt to find a northward path to Point Reyes. This time the company went beyond the Antioch area, but all they could see was the seemingly endless expanse of water that was the spring-swollen delta. They had to return to Monterey but since Father Font could tell them the exact direction they should take, they followed a direct line to their destination instead of retracing their steps. This took them over Patterson Pass and up the valley of the Arroyo Mocho and then over Mount Hamilton.

At that time there were numerous native Indian tribes living in the valley and some of the routes explored by the Spaniards were paths known and used by the Indians for centuries.

The Indians travelled on foot. (Horses, cattle and sheep are not native to California and though they had

boats made of tule reeds lashed together, they did not use them to cross the bay. The bay is wide and often rough. The route from the San Francisco area to the central valley was around the south end of the bay, over what is now Mission Pass (U.S. 680) through the Livermore Valley and over Altamont Pass, which was at first called Livermore's Pass.

The Spaniards established missions along the coast from San Diego to San Francisco and in 1797 one was built northeast of the pueblo of San Jose on a fertile plain bordering San Francisco Bay. It was called Mission San Jose and its territory included the Livermore Valley, then called Valle de San Jose. The first map of this area was made at Mission San Jose in 1824.

When the Missions were secularized in 1834, vast areas belonging to them were open for settlement by qualified citizens, especially to men who had had long military service. The government desired that homes be built, families established and the land made productive.

In the Valle de San Jose, four ranchos were applied for, including the Rancho San Ramon where the soldier Jose Amador had built a house and established his home as early as 1826. The others were the Rancho El Valle de San Jose petitioned for by members of the Bernal family, the Rancho Santa Rita claimed by the Pacheco's and Rancho Las Positas that became the home of the family of the Englishman Robert Livermore.

Robert Livermore was born in Springfield, Essex, England, in 1799. He went to sea when he was about 15 and afterwards led an exciting life that included participating in the Battle of Callao, Peru, in 1820, under Lord Cochrane. In 1822 or 1823 he came to California on the English trading ship the Colonel Young.

At the time of Livermore's arrival, California had less than 4000 European inhabitants, plus, of course many thousands of native Indians. It is likely that Livermore was welcomed and encouraged to stay and that it was an easy decision for him to make. Life at sea was harsh and life in California in its pastoral period was anything but harsh. Or so it must have seemed.

Livermore found work on a number of ranchos near Monterey and then San Jose. He stated officially in 1829

that he intended to marry and to settle in the country. He began to buy cattle and to learn the ways of managing a rancho.

In partnership with the Spaniard Jose Noriega, he applied for the easternmost rancho in this valley, the Rancho Las Positas. It was on the frontier between the Spanish settlements and the Indian villages to the east and therefore exposed to danger.

The official petition for the rancho filed in 1839 stated that a house had been built on it and land developed and that the rancho was needed for the support of the family.

In May 1838 Robert Livermore married a widow named Josefa Higuera Molina, whose father was the owner of Rancho Tularcitos near Mission San Jose. They settled at Las Positas and began to raise a family. Sometimes Robert would move Josefa and the children to Amador's house near Dublin, for greater safety from Indian attack.

Livermore's management of the rancho was successful and he became a rich man. By the time the California gold rush caused an endless stream of travelers to go past his door, his family was well established and his rancho productive. He had large herds of cattle and flocks of sheep and many horses. He had grain fields and fruit orchards and a vineyard.

Livermore was noted for his hospitality. Many of the travellers to the gold-mining regions recorded his generosity to them, some of them in books that became world-wide best-sellers.

Robert Livermore died in 1858, before the birth of the town that was named for him. As the traffic increased in the 1850s, new routes through the valley were needed and developed. Travel at that time was always with animals that needed grass and water in abundance.

In addition to the gold rush traffic there were surveyors for railroads and then the actual builders of the railroads. A Yankee named Alphonso Ladd built a home and a hotel and livery stable on a route that was more direct than the one through the Livermore rancho. This became the village of Laddsville. It was where Junction Avenue now joins East First Street in Livermore.

Correctly foreseeing that Livermore had the potential for development, William Mendenhall, one of California's earliest pioneers, decided to lay out and develop a new town when the first train went through the valley in 1869. He named the town for his old friend Robert Livermore.

Mendenhall was a member of a Quaker family from Pennsylvania. He had crossed the plains on horseback in 1845. He lived in Danville and engaged in ranching before coming to the Livermore Valley. His new town was complete with sites for a railroad depot, schools, churches, parks and other civic needs, for all of which he donated the land.

The new town was only a short distance from Laddsville and there was great rivalry between them until 1875 when a disastrous fire occured in Laddsville from which the settlement never recovered.

Dublin, in the east end of the valley had been the business center of the valley before the railroad was built but when the railroad bypassed it, the business activity of the valley became centered in Livermore.

The land on which Mendenhall planned his town was part of the Rancho el Valle de San Jose (it was by far the largest rancho in the valley) and even now, in 1979, the Rancho Las Positas is outside the city limits of Livermore.

The economy of the valley was agricultural. Cows sheep, horses and fields of hay and grain sustained the population. There were manufacturers of farm machinery, buggies and windmills, large warehouses near the railroad for storing hay and grain, and of course, businesses such as hotels and restaurants. The cattle ranches continued the tradition of the Spanish rodeos and when a big one was held in 1918 as a benefit for the Red Cross an annual rodeo became a Livermore tradition that is now famous.

Settlers came from all over the world and their hard work made them prosper, though they had to learn to tolerate the hardships of dry winters.

A modest ranch southeast of town (near Alden Lane) was one of the boyhood homes of the renowned writer

Jack London. It was in Livermore that his passion for reading developed,as recorded by London himself.

In the 1880s, vineyards of European grapes began to be planted here and wineries built. It was found that the climate and soil of the valley was ideal for dry white wines. The wineries flourished. In a book published in 1889, WINES AND VINES OF CALIFORNIA by Frona Eunice Wait, twenty three Livermore wineries are described in detail and a hundred others listed! Carloads of wine were shipped from the Livermore depot quite regularly.

1889 was the year that Charles Wetmore entered his Cresta Blanca wine in the Paris Exposition and won the Grand Prize. It was an achievment that put the California wine industry on its feet and established its potenial quality.

The advent of prohibition sealed the doom of most of the Livermore wineries,but fortunately not for all of them. Of the ones that survived, the Concannon and Wente wineries still produce famous vintages that are the pride of the valley.

Coal was first discovered in the vicinity of Corral Hollow in the 1850s but it wasn't until the 1890s, that the Treadwell family extensively developed the mine at the town they called Tesla. Coal production became a major influence on the economy of the valley. Until the mines closed about 1908, many Livermore men could and did find work in the mines. It was a way of surviving dry winters or other troubles that sometimes made earning a living on a ranch difficult. Tesla is in Alameda County and therefore connected with Livermore officially, though geographically it is in the valley to the east.

There were also magnesite mines in the hills above Mines Road and deposits of manganese and chrome. But they were not extensively developed. When rock and gravel were needed for road building-and building in general-the immense deposits of this mineral in the valley became a multi-million dollar resource for the building boom of San Francisco and the Bay Area. The Kaiser company mined gravel from the bed of the Arroyo Mocho in Livermore when they got the contract for the paved road to be built between Livermore and Pleasanton, now Stanley Boulevard.

Oil was discovered at the east end of the valley near Patterson Pass and a number of wells are still producing.

Around the turn of the century, Livermore was chosen for the site of a large hospital for mental illnesses. This was the Livermore Sanitarium established by Dr. John Robertson. Livermore's salubrious climate was a big factor in his choice of location. In 1918, a site in the beautiful canyon of the Arroyo Valle was chosen for the Arroyo del Valle Sanatorium, the Alameda County tuberculosis hospital and in 1925 the Federal Government chose a site near it for a tuberculosis hospital for veterans.

The Hetch Hetchy project of building a pipeline from Yosemite Valley to San Francisco for the San Francisco Water Company brought many workers to Livermore, since the pipe went through the hills south of town. The payroll helped Livermore during the Great Depression. The work was finished in 1934.

In 1913, the Coast Manufacturing and Supply Company, manufacturers of safety fuses, moved its plant to Livermore from Oakland. Their installation, east of town was called Trevarno. In 1952 C.M.&S. began to make fiberglass fabrics as well as fuses. The Trevarno plant gave employment to a great many Livermore people.

The Fuse Works, as it was called, was moved to Arizona in 1968 and in the same year Coast Manufacturing was merged with Hexcel Corporation. But the glass fabrics, now all made in Texas, are shipped back to Livermore to be coated. The plant still employs about eighty people.

There was a brick works on what is now Stanley Boulevard about opposite Valley Memorial Hospital. It was another source of local jobs.

Two heavyweight boxing champions were from the Livermore area. Max Baer was raised on Twin Oaks ranch near town and George Foreman was from Camp Parks in Pleasanton and he later owned a home in Livermore.

World War II brought military installations to the valley and increased business as a consequence. But after the war, the valley was still basically an agricultural community. It was the coming of facilities for nuclear

research, most notably the University of California's Lawrence Livermore Laboratory and the plant of Sandia Weapons Corporation, plus the slow but sure overflow of population from the Bay Area - suburbia - that is crowding out the agriculture and the old commerce.