

Do You Remember?



By Anne Homan
Livermore City Historian

Los Vaqueros Reservoir

The lake of the Los Vaqueros Reservoir is easily visible below our house. At times it is a bright sky blue, reflecting a few small white clouds. Occasionally, it is almost hidden by a finger of fog. Some days it is a dark gray with waves rumpling its surface: it has a mysterious look. When that happens, I am reminded of all the past life that lies hidden beneath its surface.

The reservoir lies in a valley to the north of Livermore, mostly in Contra Costa County. It was a Mexican land grant, the Rancho Cañada de los Vaqueros. Three brothers-in-law, Francisco Alviso, Manuel Miranda, and Antonino Higuera, applied for the property. Governor Micheltonena approved their petition in 1844. Three years later they sold the land to Robert Livermore. By the late 1850s many Basques from Argentina had settled in the valley. To English speakers and spellers, the sounds of V and B in Spanish were confusing. The word Basque came to be pronounced and spelled Vasco in English. The popular name for the area became “the Vasco,” and the road through the valley “Vasco Road.” Eventually the Livermore family sold the property. Through the years it has had many other owners and tenants.

In 1988 the Contra Costa Water District approved a project to build a reservoir in the valley. The quality of the drinking water that the district supplied to its 430,000 customers in Central and Eastern Contra Costa County needed to be improved. The Water District began acquiring land until they owned 18,500 acres of open space surrounding the proposed 1,450-acre reservoir. Construction began in 1994; the project was completed in three years. A formal dedication was held on 2 May 1998. A major part of the project was the rerouting of Vasco Road; it now runs to the east of the valley.

Under the mysterious waters of the reservoir are the stumps of almost 1,000 valley oak trees. The valley oak, California’s largest deciduous oak, can grow as tall as 125 feet. We witnessed the harvest from our house and

grieved for the death of the majestic trees. Their average age was 400 years. The oldest was 800 years, with an eleven-foot diameter trunk. That tree was born about 1600, meaning that it witnessed the life of the Ohlone, native American tribes, and later the changes in their lives brought by the Spanish missions. Some of the oak lumber was used in furnishing the visitor’s center at the reservoir site.

Just about in the center of the reservoir underneath the waves are the foundations of the houses belonging to Edith Grant Ordway, who bought her property in 1948. She was a rich woman, inheriting wealth from her family. Her grandfather, Adam Grant, immigrated to California from Scotland in 1850, in time to earn his wealth by selling drygoods to the gold miners. Her father, Joseph D. Grant, continued in his father’s footsteps. The Murphy, Grant & Company store at the northeast corner of Sansome and Bush Streets in San Francisco was destroyed in the 1906 earthquake and fire. The new version still stands on that site today—the Adam Grant Building. The Grants also lost their San Francisco mansion in the fire and decided to build a new home in Burlingame. While they waited for it to be built, they lived at Grant Ranch, which is today the largest Santa Clara County park, encompassing 9,553 acres west of San Jose on the Mt. Hamilton Road in Hall Valley. They bought the property in 1880 and built a house on the ranch two years later. Edith, born in 1902, probably learned her riding and shooting skills there. They did not run cattle but raised polo ponies.

After acquiring her land in the Vasco from Oscar Starr, Edith and her husband, Kent Ordway, had renovation work done on the Starr home and guest house. He had a swimming pool dug in front of the main house. They also built a log cabin out near the old corrals on the place. They liked to have barbecues and picnics there. They lived year-round on the ranch and became famous for their wild parties and antics. Edith was a beautiful woman. She dressed in jeans and shirts

on the ranch; Kent also dressed in the western style. He died of cancer in 1954. She lived on to make her own reputation. *From Rancho to Reservoir*, one of the books detailing the social history of the Vasco area required of the CCWD by the government, describes her: “In community history there are always a few men who are remembered as larger-than-life characters. It is rare for a woman to be recalled in this fashion, but former Vasco rancher Edith Ordway certainly ‘stands tall’ in local memory and legend.”

Locals interviewed for the book recalled Mrs. Ordway as “a real cowgirl who could out-gun and out-fight the boys.” She owned exotic pets, including monkeys. The book continues, “Although charming and gracious when sober, she was a real hellcat when she drank and she would take a shot at anybody without provocation. A neighbor recalled that he often drove guests to town who had been hit by buckshot.”

Last year the CCWD enlarged the reservoir, but that is a story for another column. One night I was watching the reservoir under the light of a rising full moon. All was quiet and then, probably only in my imagination, out in the middle of the lake bubbles were coming up from the bottom and popping on the surface.

(Readers can reach me at am50homan@yahoo.com.)

Free Registration with this Ad

Call or sign-up online! Exp. 04/01/12

Lessons in Piano, Voice, Guitar & Ukulele

All Ages & Levels Welcome!

Individual • Group Lessons

(925) 960-1194

GalinasMusicStudio.com

Galina's
Music Studio

2222 Second St, Suite #2
Downtown Livermore

