



## History of "The Bucket of Blood"

By John Trumbull

*The Strozzi Family's Dance Hall (also known locally as "The Bucket of Blood")*

Within the past two years the *Historian* has published a pair of articles recalling many of the nightclubs that have operated in Novato, past and present. One controversial one was omitted from those articles: the dance hall operated by the Strozzi family on Atherton Road. It might be a good time to memorialize this landmark now.

According to the Strozzi family history related by May Rodgers Ungamach in her seminal book *Novato Township* the family patriarch, Aurelio Strozzi was born July 16, 1865, in Biasca, Switzerland. As a glazier by trade, he spent eight years in South America helping to construct hothouses among other buildings. Returning to his home town in Switzerland, he married Corinna Fogliani, an

elementary school teacher 10 years his junior, by whom he had two children, Pompeo and Augusta. The family then came to the United States. Pompeo was five years old when he emigrated and he died November 13, 1981. Augusta was three years of age upon arrival, she married Peter Vanza, another emigrant from Biasca, in 1945, and she died in 1999.



*A wedding picture of Corinna and Aurelio Strozzi.*

The family spent four years in Elko, Nevada, with Aurelio's brother before coming to Novato. They purchased 25 acres on Atherton Avenue and started to learn the chicken business "from scratch." One early lesson came on a cold night when the coal oil lamp in the chicken house went out and they found 500 one-week old chicks dead in a pile. In

1917 the family purchased the Cain ranch on Atherton Avenue, which was 70 acres of marshland on the west side of the road. There

they grew hay, raised livestock and produced milk which they sold to the summer residents in the neighborhood. The Strozzi home had been built before 1909. In 1919 they constructed a gas station on the property and in 1930 they had Henry Bormolini build the first dance hall. All the time the dance hall was active, the Strozzi family supported itself by its ranching activities. Mrs. Strozzi was a trustee of the Black Point School from 1928 to 1946, while her daughter, Augusta, worked as school janitor for roughly the same period.

During the early 1930's the dance hall was a "jumping operation" as the following interview with Pompeo Strozzi published by the *Novato Advance* on May 14, 1975, recalls.

"The price of admission to the dances was 25 cents for women and 50 cents for men ... one night the doorman said he counted 80 people from Novato ... there usually were 150 to 180 people at a dance ... they came from all over, Novato and Petaluma and San Rafael were the strongest, but they came from as far



*Pompeo Strozzi and his big tractor.*

away as Fairfield past Vallejo, from Antioch and Napa and San Francisco ... when we started in 1932 it was something new, a dance hall built like a barn out in the sticks.'

"These are a few of the collective remarks of Pompeo Strozzi, now 75, and his sister Augusta (Mrs. Peter Vanza), members of the Strozzi family of Italian-Swiss descent that owned and, with the help of cousins, (Pete, Cora, Fred and Irene Fogliani, children of Corinna's brother, Tito Fogliani, who was a widower when he came to Novato) operated the 'Dance Hall' at 310 Atherton Avenue in the 1930's.

"Lively Saturday night specials were the big attraction in this building constructed with all the architectural authenticity of a mammoth chicken house that combined the charm of the rural atmosphere and the romantic glow of lighted Japanese lanterns suspended from the open beam ceilings.

"And if the rustic simplicity was one magnet for dancing lovers and visa versa, the twin allurements were live band music, 'the modern tunes that were popular, not the old-time music, we tried the old-time music twice and it didn't go, the people wanted to dance to modern music ... one time I remember I couldn't get anyone to go home, the orchestra had gone at 2 a.m. and we had put 'Beer Barrel Polka' on the phonograph, that was the most popular dance tune in the late thirties, and I remember everyone danced to after 3 a.m., they danced the 'Beer Barrel Polka' over and over again and we had to keep playing the record, they wouldn't go home ...'

"The first dance in April 1932 was followed by four tuneful years of dances almost every Saturday night, and big extra dances on the nights of July Fourth, Christmas Eve and New Year's Eve. After 1936, when other Novato area dances began to compete and the week-after-week operations also palled on the Strozzi's, the hall was rented to different lodges and groups for dances about every two weeks. With World War II came gas rationing and an end to the venture.

"But this vestige of dancing cheek to cheek in the Great Depression years and the ensuing partial recovery stands in unblemished

condition remodeled to provide apartments for Pompeo and for Augusta and her husband. Old-timers think of it still as a favorite entertainment mecca of years ago, referring with fondness to the intimate style of dancing in the thirties and with equal fondness to some of the great bouts that erupted between jealous suitors of beautiful girls, fought to the finish outside while the band played on inside.

“Aurelio and Corinna, the Strozzi parents, came to Black Point from Elko, Nevada, in April 1909, bringing with them Pompeo and Augusta, who had been born in Switzerland. Edna, youngest of the three children, was born after the family’s arrival in Black Point to operate a chicken ranch.

“The ranch branched into dance in 1932 when Louis Bormolini of Novato built the Strozzi’s the initial 20 by 100 foot building that was subsequently twice-widened to its eventual 40 by 100 feet, allowing a dance floor space 40 by 68 feet (‘as big as the Community House auditorium floor’), kitchen, cloakroom, space for the band, a horseshoe counter and a ladies’ room (‘the boys’ rooms were outside’). A 10-ounce mug of beer sold for a dime, cigarettes cost a dime a pack, and soda pop and coffee were a nickel.

“Starting with five-piece bands in 1932, band size increased to eight pieces with rising

popularity. ‘No formal dress but dressed up ... we nearly always had capacity crowd, mostly young married couples, many middle-class people, some younger boys and girls, too, and some older people, and prominent people, judges, the county clerk, Mr. Jones, Bill Gness who became supervisor, Stan Fontez the tax collector, they still remember our dances.’

“Among many memories: ‘One night in 1935 we had 50 men from Hamilton Field. The women in those days didn’t like men in uniform, there was a thing about a woman being with a man in uniform, but they said, ‘Gee, look at all those men!’ And yet the uniforms were a problem, you see how it was? So somehow they got the word to each other that it was only the uniforms that made a problem and the next Saturday night those 50 men returned, but in civilian clothing and were the girls happy!’

“ ‘We didn’t have many tag dances where a boy could cut in and the other boy would have to give over the girl to dance with him. There was

too much jealousy about that, so we had few of those tag dances ... and there was very little trouble ... there were rumors to knock the business by some who didn’t like it because we were popular, but there was no liquor allowed, only beer, and we always had a uni-



*A portrait of Corinna Strozzi and her three children Edna, Augusta, and Pompeo.*

formed private policeman on duty, two on duty for the biggest nights ... we had good times, once we had a masquerade and everyone wore masks, and we had cricket dances with cricket noisemakers, and balloon dances, where you release balloons, and waltz contests with prizes, yes, I remember now, a couple came to the masquerade from Greenwich Street in San Francisco, and he came in a fancy tuxedo with a lacey shirt, he rented that tuxedo for \$30 and

Most negative comments from locals of that era relate to events that (allegedly) occurred in the parking lots and often involved people from Hamilton A.F.B. or from out of town, (tending to validate Mr. Strozzi's comment about jealousies). Also remember that this era was fairly shortly after the repeal of Prohibition, so B.Y.O.B. in the parking lot would have been fairly standard procedure. Among the benefits we have provided our mil-



*The Strozzi Dance Hall as it looks today. It is located on the east side of Atherton Avenue.*

his wife was wearing a Spanish costume.'

“ ‘One winter night the winter of 1932 – 33, the dance went on, but it was so cold you can't believe how cold it was ... and by 2 a.m. about a dozen cars couldn't start because it was so cold. So the people had to stay overnight, they stayed in the ranch house. Half of them were from San Francisco. They missed the last ferry at 2 a.m. so they had to stay over. We had plenty of room in that big ranch house and they were welcome to stay. We don't have that house now, we sold it three years ago.’ ”

Unfortunately the reputation of the activities that took place therein have suffered over time, hence the nickname. A review of the *Advance* for the 1930's show advertisements for the bands appearing at the dances there.

itary (at least until recently) is access to plentiful and inexpensive booze. It would not have surprised anyone if the boys from Hamilton came plentifully supplied. (It may also be relevant that only the girl's toilet was located inside the building, so men were apt to meet outside the dancehall.)

The dance hall still sits on the east side of the road, as 308 and 310 Atherton Avenue. As a final romantic episode related to this building, the two long-time tenants of the apartments, after more than a decade of neighborliness, have married and still reside on the property.