

# The Novato Historian



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*Preserving Novato's History*

## Feature Section

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## Novato Comes to Life

by Alice Yarish  
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**Novato Advance, Friday July 11, 1958**

**Madeline York Recalls**

**When Novato First Came To Life**

**By Alice Yarish**

A familiar name in the annals of Novato history is Hiribarren. Last surviving member of the

Captain Hiribarren was born in France and had lived in San Francisco from whence he operated cargo ships. He became acquainted with the community of Novato when he piloted a scow up Novato Creek in the 1890's to load the apples and pears which grew in Novato's world famed orchards.



*"Halfway House" about 1900*

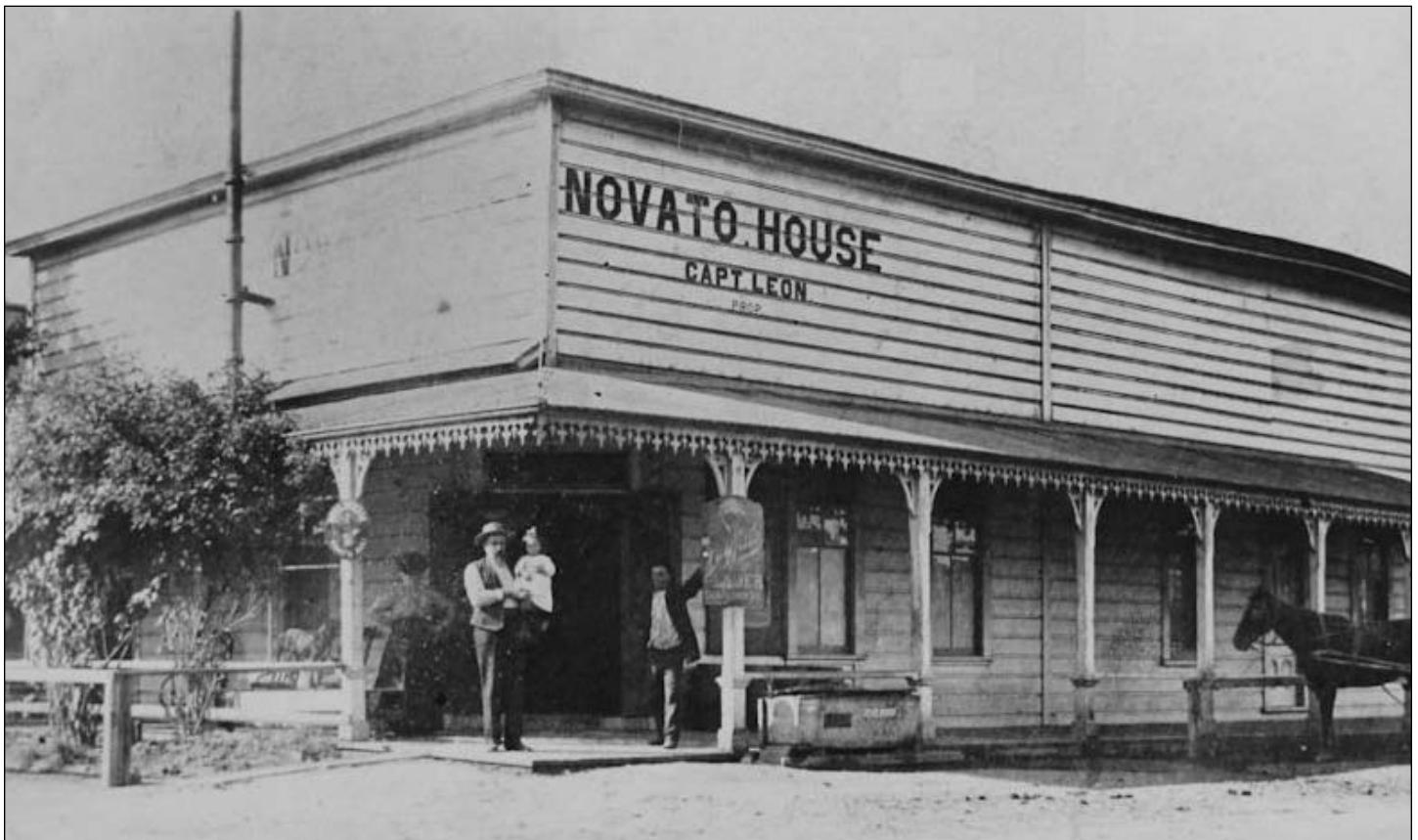
Hiribarren family in Novato is Mrs. Bert York, the former Madeline Hiribarren, who still lives in the home built by her parents at 904 Railroad Avenue.

The house, built in 1906, is furnished largely with furniture which belonged to Mrs. York's grandparents, Capt. and Mrs. Leon Hiribarren, the first members of the family to settle in Novato.



*Capt. Leon Hiribarren's "Halfway House" on Cornell property next to Nave's Cabbage Patch in 1887. Capt. Leon is standing in picture to the left with hand on hip. His wife Marie stands to his rear extreme left. Auger Hiribarren is boy holding gun and Adolph Scown is petting the dog.*

"When the trains came," cutting into the business of water shippers, he decided to give up the sea and he bought a place in "Old Town" near where the Nave shopping center is now located. There he



*Captain Leon Hiribarren holding his granddaughter, Madeline. His wife, Marie, is standing at left in front of the Novato House on Grant Avenue. (ca. 1902)*

opened a grocery and general store called “*The Half Way House.*”

### **New Town**

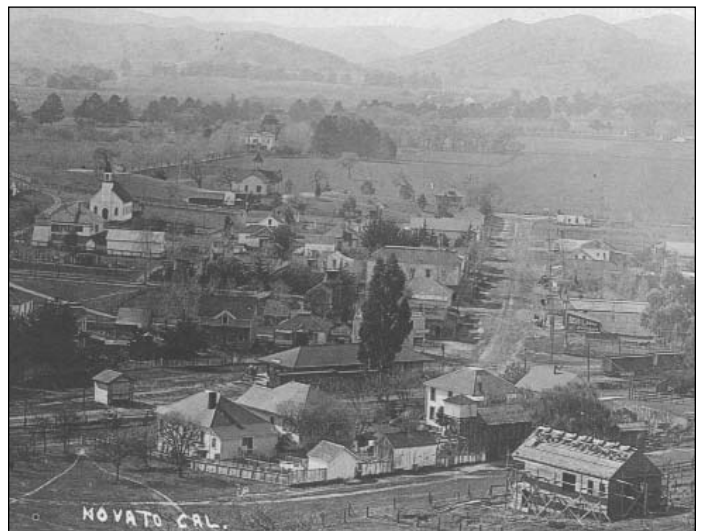
Capt. Hiribarren then sold his grocery store and moved it to “New Town,” the business district which was springing up along Grant Avenue. There in the 1890’s he bought a hotel bar, and livery stable which was located on the present site of Jim’s Sport Shop at Scott and Grant Avenue. It was known simply as “The Corner.”

In the early days the “drummers” or traveling salesmen used to come to Novato by train regularly to sell their wares to the farmers who seldom went to the city. The drummers with their fancy clothes and sporty ways stayed at the new hotel, rented horses and buggies from the livery stable for their rounds, and passed the evenings in the bar.

Mrs. Hiribarren served them wonderful meals for 50 cents, including a bottle of wine.

The captain retired in 1900 when his son Augere was married, and he turned over the busi-

ness to the young bride and groom, who operated it for several years. They sold out in about 1906 to



*House on bottom left is the DeBorba's family and next door to them is Capt. Leo Hiribarren's house built in 1906.*

Tom Keating, brother of county sheriff and uncle of the present Judge Thomas Keating of Marin’s superior bench, and to his partners Tony de Borba and a Mr. McGovern. They operated it until the automom-

bile made the combination boarding house-bar-stable obsolete.

### **Cheese Factory**

Augere Hiribarren then went into the cheese manufacturing business, one of the north Marin's leading commercial activities. He was one of four who owned cheese factories here. His first cheese plant was located north of Novato, slightly north of the William Q. Wright's Rancho de los Pantanos.

His competitors were old Judge Hermann Rudolph, who owned a cheese factory adjoining what is now Pini's mill, a Mr. Butler and Mr. Beckstead. He next built a larger plant on the site of the present Pinheiro ranch north of Olive Street on Highway 101, where he did a thriving business until the factory was destroyed by fire in 1916. He then built a smaller cheese making establishment back of the family home on Railroad Avenue.

The Hiribarrens made fine French cheeses, including the delicate Neufchatel and the stronger Camembert and Brie. They bought the milk for the cheese from Novato dairymen so there were no transportation problems. Horse drawn wagons delivered shining cans of milk to the plant daily.

Then came prohibition, and one of its little heard of but serious side effects was the death of the cheese business. Without foaming steins of beer, rich table wines, who wants cheese? The cheese which had been a mainstay at the free lunch bars now found itself without consumers.

### **No Culture**

The speakeasies and bootleg joints which sprang up in the wake of the 18th amendment did not engage in such niceties as serving free lunches. People drank bootleg to get high, not to enjoy the flavor. The serving of food was not customary in the illegal bars which were of course uncontrolled by state health agencies, and anyway, food slowed up the process of getting drunk.

Novato had its share of these illicit establishments, Mrs. York recalls, "You'd be surprised at some of the places which were turned into speakeasies," she said. One of the biggest and best of the speakeasies is now the home of a well known family on Vineyard Road in one the community's more exclusive neighborhoods.

Mrs. York's father then opened a hotel in Martinez where he became noted for his ability as a chef. He was always in demand for barbecues and big parties and was famed for his chowders and French cuisine.

He was always the chef at the annual Fourth of July celebrations in Novato which were highlighted by parades, fireworks and a community picnic and barbecue.

### **Parade Queen**

In 1916 Madeline Hiribarren (Mrs. York) was elected queen of the Fourth of July parade and rode down Grant Avenue on a horse-drawn float wearing an elaborate white lace dress and a crown. Her grandfather always led the parade on horseback as Grand Marshall.



*Leon Hiribarren*

The social life of the community in those days consisted mostly of dances and parties given by church groups. The Catholics gave an annual dance at which the big event was the waltz contest for which prizes were given.

The first persons to own automobiles in Novato were Steve Porcella, who owned the blacksmith shop at Grant and Reichert, and Dr. Kuser, the town medico, Mrs. York recalls.

Dr. Kuser was a beloved man and took care of all the community's ills, delivered the babies and consoled the sick. His right hand woman was Mrs. York's grandmother, the captain's wife; it was she who went out in the night with Dr. Kuser to deliver babies, and in a pinch she could deliver them by herself if the doctor wasn't available, or if two-storks came at once.

She and her daughter-in-law, Annie Casey Hiribarren, were the town's devoted but untrained

volunteer nurses. When the terrible train wreck of July 3, 1908, occurred on the NWP tracks near Grant Avenue, it was the two Hiribarren women who rushed to the aid of the scalded engineer and firemen, dressing their wounds and administering first aid until the injured men could be removed to a hospital.

### Sick Friends

All of her life Annie was to be called out in the night to care for sick friends and her skill at comforting others earned her the admiration of the community.

For every single baby that was born in this



*Marie Hiribarren*

town she crocheted a cap. Whether or not she knew the family, she took or sent a dainty little cap to all the new arrivals.

Annie Hiribarren met a tragic death on October 23, 1941, when she and two other Novato women were

killed instantly in an auto accident on Highway 101 and Olive Avenue.

The Novato Advance issued one of its rare "extras" to announce the news of her death and the deaths of Mrs. Elizabeth Felker, 77, the driver of the car, and her sister, Mrs. Madeline Hilton, 75.

Said the Advance, "Novato as a whole was shocked by the news of the accident. It didn't seem possible that three such fine women could be taken from this community so suddenly. But such is the plan of life and who are we to question that destiny. Our heartfelt sympathies are extended to the families of these women and may they find some comfort in knowing the high esteem in which their loved ones were held in the community."

### Died in 1942

Annie's husband, Augere, survived her only six months and then he died in 1942 of a heart condition.

Surviving them were their children, Mrs. York, her three sisters, Norine Garich of Cotati, Anita Breitrutz of Menlo Park, Vivain Huffman of Avenal, and her brother, Leon Hiribarren of Petaluma.

The Hiribarren children, like their father before them, attended the old Grant School in the structure which is now the Novato Salvage Shop, at the corner of Sweetser Street and Highway 101. Madeline

and one of her sisters boarded at Dominican Convent for several years during their elementary school days.

They later attended San Rafael High School, going each day by train, Anita Hiribarren was active in the first little theatre group in Novato, established in 1923 in conjunction with the Community Club.



*Madeline Hiribarren York  
1958*

With the advent of prohibition, the end of the cheese business, the depletion of the orchards, Novato died. During the 20's and early 30's, nothing happened here. There was no new building, no increase in population, no jobs. Businesses moved away.

It was not until the establishment of Hamilton Air Force Base that life stirred in the town and not until World War II that the housing boom wakened the sleepy village from its decades of lethargy.

### Happy Here

But Mrs. York is happy here. She loves the old town and her home, which is crammed with beautiful antiques of furniture, glass and china. She enjoys an outdoor life and spends much time gardening.

However she regrets that no members of her family have sons to carry on the name of Hiribarren. Her brother's only son died a few years ago and with him the family name, once so well known and respected in this community.