

The Novato Historian

The Quarterly Publication of the
Novato Historical Guild, the Novato History Museum,
and the Hamilton Field History Museum

Preserving Novato's History
Feature Section

Contents © 2013 Novato Historical Guild, Inc.



October-December 2013

The Novato Historian

Volume 37, Number 4

Bits and Pieces

Early Novato in 1920

By Susan and John Trumbull

October was family history month nationally. As you may have read in our last Historian, the Historical Guild Exhibit Committee, this

time coordinated by Edna Manzoni, created a new exhibit centered on artifacts from several of the Novato pioneer families: the Cains, the Burdell/Pachecos, and the Naves. We have been docents with the third grade local history tour program the Guild has conducted for many years, and most of the information we use comes from the exceptional book, *Novato Township*, authored by May Ungemach. As both a tour guide and a genealogist, we wondered what information from another source, the federal census, might reveal. As you may know the census is taken every 10 years, but only released to the public on the 70th year after being taken. (Most of the 1890 census data was lost in a fire.) We

chose to concentrate on the 1920 census. This gives us a picture of the population before the

Great Depression of the 1930s, and before the Golden Gate bridge or Hamilton Air Field were constructed.



A. J. Cain

Several interesting questions (beside the names of wives and children) were asked as part of that census. Is your home owned or rented? If owned, is it mortgaged? What is your color or race? What was your age at your last birthday? What year did you immigrate to the US? Are you naturalized, and, if so, when? Are you able to read? Can you write? There was a special section entitled "Nativity and Mother Tongue." It asked the place of birth and first language of the person being enumerated, and also of that person's mother and father. It also inquired as to the trade, profession or type of work you did, the industry for which it was done and whether the person

being interviewed was the employer, independent contractor or paid employee.

The 1920 census in Novato was taken by Mr. George M. Barker on January 29. Unfortunately, the method he used to get his material is not as predictable as in some later censuses. He did not enter his data geographically by street, or by the sequence of the houses on a specific street. In some instances he gives street names, and some are not familiar to us today. For example, he refers to Rankin (street), which, based on houses we know, is most likely the present Reichert Street. Another omission from the census is any reference to the location of the businesses in Novato. (This is true of the early business directories in the reference room of the downtown museum.) Consequently listings for some streets such as Grant Avenue seem very sparse.

Let us take a look at the Cain family. There is a lot of interesting information in *Novato Township*, much of which Ms. Ungemach obtained from in-person interviews done before 1989. For example, she relates the movements of Marvin and Frances Cain prior to their arrival in Novato in 1899 with their two boys, James William (Will) and Albert J. (Al). Marvin settled on a farm in Black Point. In 1900 Will went to Alaska with his sister, "Molly" Fox, and her husband, Jim. Will returned after 18 months with a bag of gold valued at \$2,000 and the body of his sister who had died of typhoid fever in Alaska. (The website "Measuring Worth" estimates that \$2,000 in 1900 is equivalent to almost \$400,000 in economic status today, so Will did well.)

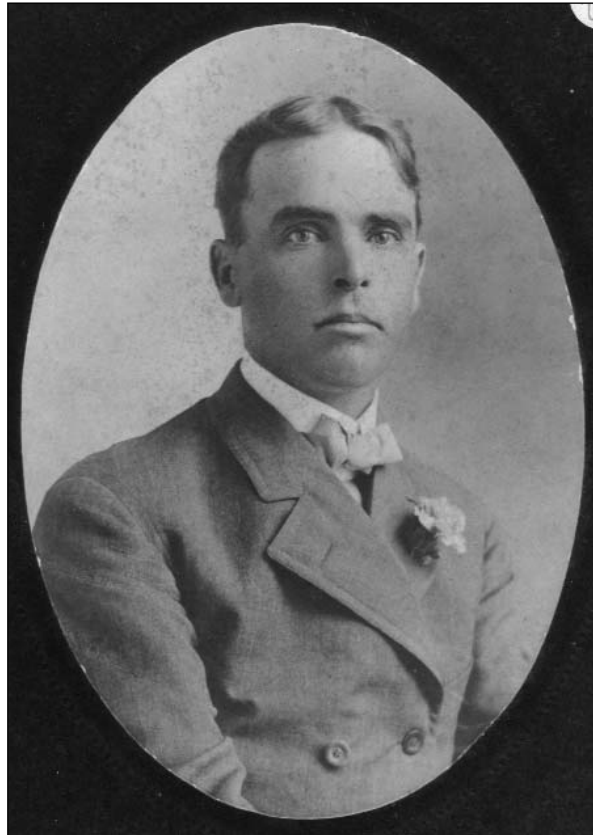
With the help of his brother, Will brought utility services to Novato. (Consider that in 1908 only 8% of the US households had a tele-

phone. That was the year Will installed the switchboard for the five telephones in Novato. The first customers were Scott's store, Dr. Kuser, R.H. Trumbull of the Novato Home and Land Co., the railroad depot, and Judge Rudolph's cheese factory. Ms. Ungemach's seminal book tells the story of the farsighted efforts of these two brothers in greater detail. We commend it to your reading. We also have an oral history interview with a member of the Cain family that is worth listening to.)

According to the 1910 census, Al, with wife Della, had moved to Inyo county where he worked as an electrician for the Powerhouse Company; however, by 1920 they had returned to Novato, living on Machin Avenue with daughter, Hazel, aged 6.

The two boys are enumerated in the Novato portion of the 1900 census, but the five daughters living with their families in Oregon are not mentioned. (Relying only on this census would deprive the Cain family of 5 children.) The 1920 census reaffirms that Marvin was born in Ohio, and that Frances was born

in Kentucky. They married in 1862. (It is an interesting factoid that at the year of their marriage their families would have been preparing to go to war against each other. Marvin came from parents born in Ohio and New York, Frances from parents born in Kentucky and Virginia.) Marvin is listed as a retired farmer, now 77 years old living (with Frances at age 70) in a house they own free of mortgage on Sherman Avenue. The museum's file on the Cain family has a copy of the deed by which Marvin sold his farm on Black Point Road (now the southeast end of Atherton Avenue) to the Strozzi family in 1917.



James William Cain

While the house number is not given, the family visited before the Cains is John and Sarah Edsberg. Both are 50 years of age, and their house is owned free of any mortgage. John gives his occupation as an employee in a meat market (butchershop ?) He was born in Denmark and spoke Danish while Sarah and her



Novato Utility Company office at Grant and Machin.

parents were New Yorkers. The 1930 census will list Marvin, age 87 and now a widower, living on Sherman Avenue in a house worth \$3,000 which he owns. Sarah Edsberg, age 60 and now a widow, lives there also as a servant.

James W. "Will" Cain (age 40) owns his own place free of any mortgage where he lives with wife Bessie (29) and their children: Albert W. (6), Guy E. (7) and Homer A. (8). (There will be a daughter, Virginia, but she is not born yet.) The location reference is to "Black Point bet Chase." (The order of enumeration just prior to James' listing shows the census taker operating in the area of Cherry Street, contacting the families of Julia Steffan (a divorcee), Albert D. White, Oscar Comrudson, George Barker (the census taker), Antoni S. Lopes, and Charles Brown, all of whom are listed as living on farms. However, the person interviewed right before the Cains is Robert G. Shouts, a Canadian who rents while owning a practice as a physician and druggist. This may indicate that the census taker was in the area of Cherry Street where it parallels the freeway today to connect to the west end of Atherton Avenue.) James reports his employment as a wage earning elec-

trician at the Novato Utility Co. Daughter Virginia, says Bessie Cain was the early telephone operator, but she does not declare employment in the 1920 census.

Albert Cain, wife Della and children Hazel (8) and Dorothy (5), are renting a house on Machin Street. (Two other families of about the same age are listed as renting on Machin: Harold Stone an assistant agent for the NWP Railroad with his wife, Minnie and daughter Catherine Stone is one family, all of English origin. The other is John Rolla, a carpenter, and his wife Edith. John was born in Italy and his native language was Italian. He is married to a Californian whose parents were both Portugese.) Al Cain lists his occupation as a wage earning electrician employed by the Novato Utility Co. The Cain brothers were being quite self depreciating because the 1925 Novato City Directory lists



Will and Bessie Cain in front of Novato Utilities.

J. W. Cain as "President-Manager" and A. J. Cain as "Secretary-Treasurer" of the Novato Utilities Co. incorporated. R. H. Trumbull was "Vice President."

Another person who appears with interesting information in the 1920 census is Alexander "Sandy" MacIntosh, longtime blacksmith assistant to Steve Porcella in The Fashion Shop. For years we have been told that he lived in the tent shaped structure atop the smithy. In the 1910

census he is enumerated as a boarder with Steve and Minnie Porcella. In 1920 the family of Joe S. and Mary Gormez appears between the Porcellas and A. MacIntosh. Sandy, unmarried at age 45, is listed as head of household now, renting his residence. He was born in Massachusetts of a Canadian father and Irish mother. In 1930 he is found on Center Road, owning his home, but still unmarried. He gives his occupation as a truck driver for wages, and why he left his employment with the Porcellas we have not yet learned; but it appears he did not retire as a blacksmith.

We could go on in this one census raising more questions and prying out more information, but there is no more room, and you, dear reader, may have no more patience. If you are interested, your computer through Ancestry.com and several other websites can open this vista for you.

The 1880, 1900, 1910, 1920, 1930 and 1940 Censuses following the Cain family are available in the Cain folder at the Novato History Museum. Many other familiar Novato families can also be found on these pages.

Sanborn Insurance Company map of Novato—May 1924—Population 550

