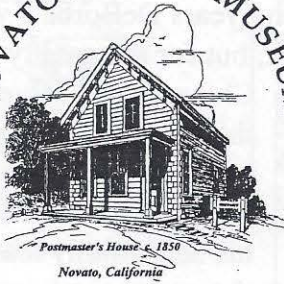


NOVATO HISTORY MUSEUM



The Novato Historian

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Preserving Novato's History

Feature Section

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Novato by Night: A Retrospective on Twentieth Century Saloons

By John A. Trumbull

Once again I have been thinking about the oft heard comment by newly arrived residents that "Novato goes to bed at 8 p.m." This has not always been the case, however. I wrote an article for the *Novato Historian* about Square Dancing which flourished in town for at least 50 years. This series of articles is intended to stir the memories of those readers whose taste was for action after midnight.

The nineteenth century: In the late 1800's, when Novato was literally a wide spot in the road between Petaluma and San Rafael, and when Nicasio was as vibrant a town as Novato, our first businesses were bars. "**Our House,**" which appears on the Rancho Novato Survey map of 1862, was a saloon in addition to being a general store. The *Marin Journal* (whose files go back to 1861) records the unfortunate death of a "Mr. Casey" at that establishment in June 1861. Henry T. Jones, Novato's first postmaster who resided in the house that now serves as the Novato History Museum, partnered with Peter Smith in "Our House" until 1863 when Jones became sole owner of that business. He operated it until his untimely death in 1872. A second business, "**Block's Store**" was probably another mixed use establishment at the same time in a nearby location, close to the present intersection of Novato Boulevard and Diablo Avenue. In 1871 Adolf G. Scown, who

later served as a Marin County Supervisor, opened the "**Halfway House**" saloon, also on the Novato Road (Novato Boulevard near its intersection with Center Road). Not counting the farms and blacksmith shops, retail sale of goods and liquor seems to have been the most significant industry in Old Novato.

The earliest businesses in the area we now call "Old Town" had significant involvement in the "spirits trade," in significant part due to Novato's location on the rail line to the Russian River country. **The Novato Hotel and Saloon** served food and drink on the southwest corner of Scott Street and Grant Avenue. **Loustaunau's Saloon** and meeting room (the present Druid's Hall on the southwest corner of Reichert and Grant) was constructed in 1889. **Sutton's Livery stable and saloon** was right behind the Hotel on Scott street. All three were in operation by 1890. **Yelmorini's Inn** and saloon behind the Flatiron Building on Scott street opened in the early 1900's. All these businesses were oriented at the business generated by the railroad, which came to town in 1879. **A. D. Scott's grocery store and saloon** is the two story building still standing on the southwest corner of Sherman and Grant, and Scott was an influential businessman prior to the turn of the century. May Ungemach, in her seminal book *Novato Township* notes in the biography of the Dilena family that

Mr. D. established his saloon on Grant Avenue between Reichert and Machin streets in 1900.

[The majority of my research for this article was done in telephone books, so I may be a year late on my dates. Generally telephone and business directories are published once a year about April or May so anyone who did not obtain or surrender a telephone number or place a classified ad as a "Cocktail Lounge" before January or February would not effect a change in the directory. The years I will cite hereafter will be the years of the directory without any adjustment unless so noted.]

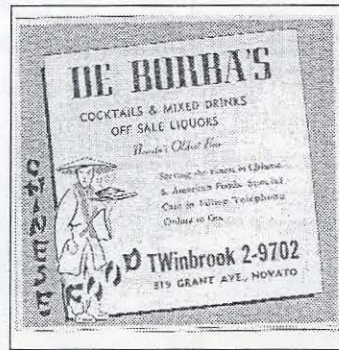
The twentieth century: The Novato Museum contains a *General Reference Book for the First Six Months of 1908* covering all of Marin County. The section on Novato lists 13 businesses. Five of those businesses are listed as being strictly saloons: DeBorba's, Loustanau's, Yelmorini's and two businesses whose names are too blurred to read. Three more businesses are listed as having mixed use: E. R. Samuel's "G.S. & saloon,"

Frank J. Silva's "Gro & saloon" and the Sutton Brother's "Saloon & livery." *Novato Township* (in the Dilena biography) relates that in 1908 Mr. D. sold his saloon on Grant Avenue to Antone DeBorba to be run by his son who was not enamored by life on the family dairy on the north side of Deer Island facing Olive Avenue.

In 1923 the Marin County telephone directory listed the Novato Exchange Café in its "yellow pages" as being run by A. DeBorba Jr. (Phone #113). We have no more directories in our collection until 1929, when Prohibition shut down legal liquor sales. **DeBorba's** became a billard parlor on Grant Avenue and Antone opened an ice cream shop on Redwood Boulevard. (See the picture in article on Milkshakes published in 2006.) After



prohibition Antone returned to the restaurant and saloon business. For many years DeBorba's was known not only for its bar, but for the quality



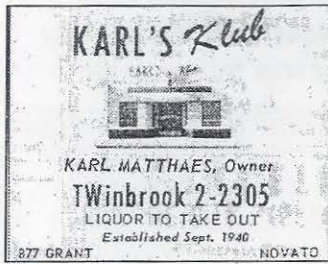
Chinese food served in the adjacent (and connecting) restaurant of the same name. Sid and his son, Jimmy leased the restaurant from Mrs. DeBorba, and could often be found in the back room playing Pedro. As early as 1958

DeBorba's was capitalizing on its place in Novato history.

In 1944 the Utilities Company (a Cain Brothers business) published a telephone directory. DeBorba's was the only advertised "Cocktail Lounge." In the white pages, however, now appeared a listing for the Village Inn (phone #452). **The Village Inn** was quite inconspicuous being listed only in the white pages from 1944 to 1953. Only after 1953 did it appear in the classified ad section under Cocktail Lounges. The *Novato Advance* reported in February 1954 that the Village Inn, located at 7425 Redwood Highway and owned by Dave Crandall, was robbed by two safecrackers of \$1,665.00 and 3 cases of whiskey. The villains (from Texas and Arkansas) were caught in Fresno and convicted and sentenced in Marin in May 1954. The Village Inn closed about 1966.

By 1947 there are 4 cocktail lounges advertising: DeBorba's at 819 Grant Avenue (phone #67-M), Karl's Klub at 877 Grant Avenue (phone #38-J), the Village Inn (phone #452), and Saddlebar Winkleman (phone #58-J). **Saddlebar Winkleman** operated from 1947 to 1953 in a multipurpose structure built partially on pilings over the northeast side of Novato Creek where it crosses Redwood Boulevard at the stop light by the present fire district headquarters. In addition to the saloon, there was a restaurant and a gas station and





a Brahma bull in a pen behind the bar for the riding pleasure of the patrons. When Saddlebar closed the **Club Rio** opened at the same location and served

the public until 1962.

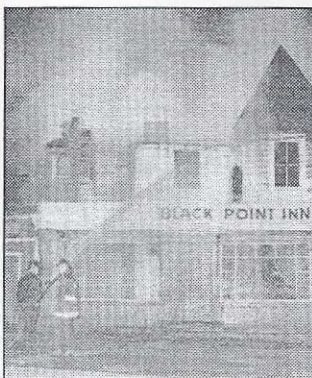
In a classified ad in the 1955 directory, Karl Mattheas claims **Karl's Klub** was established in September 1940, however he does not have any listing in the 1944 directory. Karl Mattheas sold his establishment in 1978 to a new saloon operation which opened in 1978 at the same location but



with a new décor as the **Bit-A-Honey**. This oasis only recently closed following a brush with the law. This leaves DeBorba's as the oldest public saloon still in operation, and it remains at the same location with virtually the same décor. It is by far the longest continuous advertiser in the cocktail lounge classified section of the Novato telephone directories, and it is still owned by the

DeBorba family. Since the Druids still retain the original bar in the Loustaunau building, I believe that location is the longest operating, social liquor dispensary in Novato.

In 1948 a new listing appears in our telephone book. **The Little Cliff House** is located at



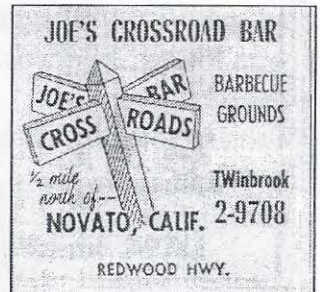
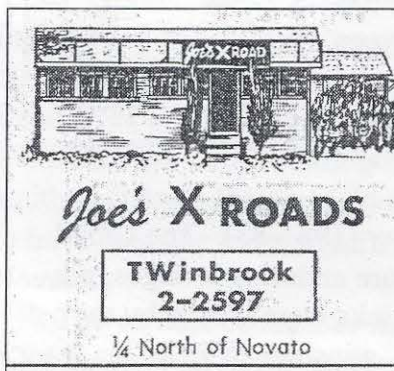
Highway 37 in Black Point (phone #843-M). I think this is the precursor to the Black Point Inn which opened later at 10 Grandview in Black Point. The Little Cliff House was short lived, however, disappearing from the directories in 1951. It would

appear that the beautiful blonde waitress (Anita Voorhies) who so impressed the young Joe Giari

was not enough to sustain a viable business. **The Black Point Inn** (TW2-9721) enjoyed a spurious reputation that it had been a rum runner's landing during Prohibition. In fact, it operated as a destination type lounge and restaurant until a disastrous fire on April 29, 1976. Today there is no trace of this night spot.

Also in 1951 an ad appears under cocktail lounges for "**E.**

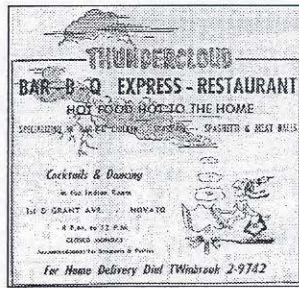
Armbruster" at 7609 Redwood Highway (phone #57-J). This listing appears in 1952, but not thereafter, because Mr. Armbruster sold the bar and leased the land to Joe Simontacchi. Joe operated



the **Crossroads Bar** at the north end of Redwood Boulevard (just south of the present traffic light marking the west end of San Marin Drive overpass) until 1988. Although

advertised in the 1955 classified section of the Los Gatos Telephone Company's Novato Directory as "**Joe's Xroads,**" the name commonly used by local residents of Novato, Joe generally used the long form of the name in the classified section from 1959 until yielding to an office building and apartment complex in 1988. Note the appeal to the family trade in the first classified ad. This is what encouraged the Square Dancers to breakfast there after some of their hoe-downs and upon occasion to dance in the pavilion behind the bar. Also note that Novato has apparently slipped northward between the 1955 and the 1958 ads. For a considerable period the Simontacchi family had the Novato cocktail set surrounded, because Allie Simontacchi married into the DeBorba family and presided behind the bar at DeBorba's for about forty years until only a few years ago.

The year 1957 was arguably the biggest year for the cocktail lounge business: four new establishments opened, and two of those locations have been among the most consistent lounge locations. At 1009 First Street the **Thundercloud** appeared.



It was not a long lived name, yielding in the 1959 classified directory to the **Cloud Five**. The chief difference seems to be the switch from spaghetti and Bar-B-Q to German cuisine. Many mid-twentieth century Novatans will remember attending meetings in the second floor banquet room at 1009 First Street. I recall the Jaycees gathering there in the mid 1960's, and the Moose used it as a transition location



during their move from 850 Lamont Avenue to 8141 Redwood Highway (1981-83). The Cloud Five was one of our more enduring lounges, perhaps in part because drinks were served by the



winsome Winnie Robinson, whose smile, saucy repartee, and short skirts engendered a following of their own. The Cloud closed about 1974 to be immediately replaced by Pickerings. **Pickerings**

served Novato until 1980 when there was a brief hiatus during which **Stu's Inferno** served, appearing in the classified directories for 1980 and 1981. In 1981 **Brown's Binyerd** opened at that location, and Brown's has held forth ever since.



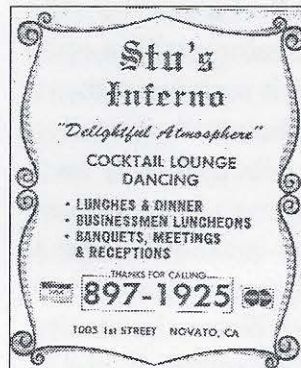
The third lounge opening in 1957 was called **The Plush Horse**. It held out at 878 Grant Avenue only until 1960. Another short lived business that advertised for the drinking trade was **Blondie's** at 819 Grant Avenue This was the restaurant adjacent to DeBorba's, and probably utilized their bar serv-

ice through the connecting door. **Blondie's** only lasted from 1986 to 1988. It was followed by **Shelly's Place**, which had the same arrangements, but less emphasis on the bar.



In 1958 the popular **Joe's** chain came to Novato. Already established in San Rafael and Corte Madera and with Sonoma **Joe's** in Petaluma, South Novato Boulevard did not prove fertile territory. **Novato Joe's** was closed by 1963.

Some of the more serious and least advertised saloons in Novato are among the longest lived businesses. The Village Inn, previously mentioned, was open for twenty two years. **The Town Club**, located at 1005 Grant Avenue (first phone number 359 J) operated from 1952 to 1979. It only closed



because the property was sold to the Westamerica Bank, and cash started moving over the new bar in both directions. During its existence the Town Club rarely felt impelled to advertise its existence or its long hours of operation. A similar philosophy with

similar results was practiced by **The Meadows**. This serious drinking establishment operated at 5965 Redwood Boulevard until the freeway cut off access, and the land was transformed into the Shell gas station in Ignacio. (This saloon is not to be confused with The Meadow Club which is located at the golf course near Fairfax. The clientele was significantly different, and there was a pool table in Novato.) One of the longest lived is the **Viking Bar** at 7377 Redwood Highway, just three doors north of Grant Avenue. Opened in about 1960 it is operating today, with minimal advertising.



This isn't the end, dear reader. There are more "Lounges" you may remember. I hope to follow up on them in another article.