



The Novato Historian

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FEATURE SECTION

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Preserving Novato's History

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Sherman Avenue, A Short History

Looking at a 1908 picture of Sherman Avenue in the Novato History Museum is looking into a page of history and the development of a residential street occupied by prominent citizens. The street itself remained unpaved until the 1920's and the mud and wagon and buggy ruts must have been a trial to anyone using that way to get home. In the summer the dust rising off the dried mud was a challenge to the hardworking housewife. It was not until the 1920's that Novato finally paved its downtown thoroughfares, after shipping its cobblestones from Mt. Burdell to San Francisco for that city's use.

At the corner of DeLong and Sherman (#901) in 1896, a church was erected to house the congregation of the Presbyterian Church. Originally the Protestant community supported a visiting Baptist minister but the determination of Misters Kelly and Reynolds and the formation of a Board of Trustees

finally inspired the citizens to raise the money to build the present building. The corner stone was laid with great ceremony on March 26, 1896 and in a copper box buried at the time, were placed "a copy of the Holy Bible, a list of church members, and copies of both the Marin Journal and the Sausalito News". (from the Marin Journal 26 March, 1896.) It welcomed those church minded Novatoans who did not attend Our Lady of Loretto Catholic Church to come to Sunday service. It's first Trustees were: A. D. Scott, Walter

Harper, W. J. Steele, James Smith and D. Z. Wright. President was C. E. Carlile and secretary Johan Van Lienden. Some early parishioners were: Mrs. C. E. Carlile, Mrs. E. R. Mc Donald, soloist, Mrs. Binford, pianist, Mrs. Laura Simmons, Mr. and Mrs. Charles Clarkson, Mrs. E. R. Lane, Mrs. Walter Busher, Mrs. Liza Potter, and Mrs. J. T. Thompson. Mr. & Mrs. Carlile were married in the church in September of 1897. More than 50 years later an addition to the church was made called Trevitt Hall for the Reverend Daniel Trevitt, who served in World War II and died shortly after his return from overseas, where he had

Continued on page F2, see Sherman Avenue



Novato History Museum picture

East Grant Avenue, circa 1911

Sherman Avenue

continued from page F1

served as chaplain. (Novato Township Pgs. 155-157).

The rooster atop the steeple was made after 1960 when the city acquired the building for City Hall. Al Bowman a local property owner decided that the building needed a weather vane

like the one previously on the church, and he cut out a rooster for that purpose.

Among the early ministers was Charles Christensen, who in addition to his parish duties was also a home builder in town. Mr. Christensen was well known for his participation in community activities, including the Masonic Lodge and the Community House Board of Directors.

It wasn't until 1918 that the minister's house was built to house the current incumbent and his family. This building is now #905.

At the time the church was built the only other buildings on the street were the Scott store at the corner of Grant and Sherman, and the old Scott home (later moved across Grant to build the present

Continued on page F3, see Sherman Avenue



First Presbyterian Church built in 1896, stands alone. Became Novato's first city hall in 1962

Sherman Avenue

continued from page F2

house at #917). The church building was the start of a couple of decades of construction on Sherman Avenue.

string running across the door and front windows of the store all the way to the bedroom in his house. Any movement of the string rang a bell over his bed. There were occasional false alarms when the family cat played with the string, however, one morning about 5 a.m. there

nightshirts and gowns to see what was happening. It may have been the same man who burglarized the store later, but this time he took all of the shoes and left the boxes." (Novato Township, pgs. 265-297) In later years, the house was occupied by George Hall, banker with the Novato Bank, who had originally come to Novato as the station agent for the railroad and then served on the Board of Directors of the Bank.

In 1905, Mr. Marvin Cain and his wife moved from their ranch near Black Point into a new home at 916 Sherman Avenue. His son Will established the Novato telephone exchange in 1908, brought electric utilities to the area in 1911 and with his brother A.J. established the water company a year later. By 1916 they had incorporated their three businesses under the name "Novato Utilities Company". The home was torn down in the 1950's to be replaced by the present structure, the residence of the Cain granddaughter Maureen Tresch. All told, four generations of the Cain family have lived on this site.

Next to the pastor's house at #909 is the George Morrison house. Looking at the architecture it must have been built in the same 1900 to 1918 period as the houses on either side. Mr. Morrison was the cashier at the Novato Bank, and was also very active in many organizations and boards of the town including the Sanitary District commission.

And finally, the two houses at the corner of Sherman and DeLong. The Nielsen/Simmons house at the corner at #900 was built in 1906 for Hans & Susanna Nielsen who moved there from their ranch in Ignacio. After Mr. Nielsen's death in 1921 his widow decided to move the fine old barn at the back of the

Continued on page F4, see Sherman Avenue

Novato History Museum picture



A.D. Scott

Mr. Fred Hamilton who with his brother James ran the general store on Grant and Sherman opposite Scott's store, in 1904 built a home for his family: a wife and 3 daughters behind the store at 920 Sherman Avenue.

"Mr. Hamilton worried about burglary to his store and rigged a burglar alarm consisting of a

was some real excitement. The bell rang. Fred grabbed his gun and headed for the store. There was a man inside all right, but Fred decided to stay out of sight around the corner of the building until he found out if the man had a gun. The burglar ran out and Fred shot at him a few times, but missed him. The neighbors all turned out in their

Sherman Avenue

continued from page F3

property to Sherman Avenue. (#908) and convert it into a rental home. (see below). Frances Bond McGlaufflin quoted in the *Novato Advance* stated that she



Fred Hamilton

Novato History Museum picture

remembered

“the elaborate luncheons and teas at the home of Mrs. Hans

Nielsen. The Nielsen home, white and spacious faced the Presbyterian Church. The parties were interesting affairs because they brought groups of ‘city’ people to Novato. Hans Nielsen was a retired sea captain and he and his wife had lived the many years he was at sea in San Francisco. Retiring, they came to Novato to make their home. The home was

lavishly furnished, richly carpeted in red, in an era when ‘wall to wall’ was the thing in older homes. There were heavy rich drapes at the window, and spindly gold chairs in the long living room. There were pictures from the French period, and massive furniture in the dining room where sideboards and bow front china cupboards held Bavarian, Dresden, and Haviland china in profusion. The table settings for the Nielsen parties were a decorator’s dream, set with ornate silver, and cutglass holding the beautiful flowers grown by the old captain. When the elaborate parties ended, only Hans Nielsen was permitted to help with the washing of the exquisite china. Huge Turkish bath towels were stretched on the drain boards to prevent chipping of the delicate china, the silver was meticulously counted, and the priceless pieces restored to their drawers and wrappings.”

The Nielsen house was purchased in

1931 by William and Laura Simmons on Mrs. Nielsen’s death. He was a grocer & butcher in town

with three children. The house was purchased by the city from the estate in 1982.

Mrs. Nielsen’s barn (#908) has become known as Hanen House after one of its most famous residents. William Hanen was born in 1860 in Syracuse, New York. His father was killed in the Civil War and he was subsequently reared in Australia and apprenticed to a printer. At 21 he came to California and worked in the printing business. He served one term in the State Assembly as Representative from Mendocino County. At age 62 he became publisher of the *Novato Advance* in 1922. The first paper was printed in the Flatiron Bldg. on Grant Avenue and Scott Street. In April of 1923, he acquired a new building at 868 Grant Avenue for the *Novato Advance*. The first issue of the paper was July 1, 1922 at 50 cents per year. Shortly, due to success, it was published on the first and third Saturday of the month but by 1924 had become a weekly, enlarged to five columns and the new subscription price was \$2 per year. In September 1923 he married Miss Eva Sherlock, his first venture into matrimony. In 1940 at age 80 he sold the *Novato Advance* and after only a year of retirement he died.

Reading the above one can see that Sherman Avenue has always been a center of Novato life, and a fine example of its early architecture. On a fine day walk its sidewalks and with this article in hand identify its historic structures.

Editor’s Note

The above article was excerpted from the Novato Advance, the Marin Journal, the files of the Novato History Museum and “Novato Township” by May Rodgers Ungemach. ❖

Sherman Avenue

- 900: Neilsen/ Simmons House (c.1906)
Neilsen: Built for Hans & Susanna who moved here from their ranch in Ignacio. Purchased on their death by William & Laura Simmons in 1931. He was a grocer & butcher. He and wife had 3 children. House sold to city after her death in 1982.
- 908: Hanen House (former barn of Nielsen house
moved to present site(c. 1921)and made into a rental house. Best known resident was probably
Wm. Hanen: editor and publisher of the Novato Advance. First issue July 1, 1922 at 50 cents per yr.
Pub. On 1st and 3rd Sat. In 1924 became weekly.
- 916: Present Tresch home. C. 1950 Site of Marvin Cain house
(c. 1905)
Son, Will Cain started the utilities company, later joined by his brother A.J. Cain. Present occupant Tresch is his grand-daughter. New house on site built in the 1950's.
- 920: George Hall house (c.1904) banker; Novato Bank; with
George Morrison (see 911 Sherman). Was station agent and later on the Board of Directors of Bank.
- 901: Presbyterian Church (c. 1896)
Cornerstone laid March 26, 1896. Became City Hall in 1963. Rooster on top was made by Al Bowman who decided that the building needed a weather vane like the one previously on the church, and he cut out the rooster. Church addition added c. 1950 and call Trevitt Hall after pastor who was a chaplin in WWII.
- 905: Pastor's house (Manse) C. 1918 Built for the use of the church
minister.
- 909: George Morrison House, banker, Novato Bank with Geo.
Hall at 920 Sherman. Morrison was first cashier at the bank
- 917: Scott/Busher house (c. 1912)
Scott home until his death c. 1945.
Mrs. Busher, widow of Veterinarian bought the house
on Scott's death and lived until 1957.
- 908 Machin Ave.: Community House (c. 1922)
Built by volunteers and donations by merchants of Novato with a
Community House Council elected yearly to supervise fund raising and
social activities.