



# The Novato Historian

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*Preserving Novato's History*

## Feature Section

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## A Trip to the Country— Description of the Novato Ranch

A letter from A. B. Rockwell written Dec. 28, 1861

*[This letter is reprinted from the September 1989 Guild newsletter. It is not known whether the idiosyncrasies of spelling, punctuation and capitalization are attributable to the original or the reproduction.]*

On the 17<sup>th</sup> of December, I shook the dust, or rather, the mud of the city, from my feet, and stepped on board the Petaluma steamer, and soon lost sight of this modern Babel, and was well under weigh [*sic*] towards my destination. The skies were serene, and the mellow rays of the sun kissed lovingly the waters of the bay.

An hour's steaming landed us at San Quentin—a depot for rogues and rascals without which no State can rise above the condition of semi-barbarism. At this point I mounted a Mexican saddle, and putting spurs to the mettlesome mustang, in due time hauled up at San Rafael, four miles distant. This is a thriving town—the county seat of Marin county.

"Novato Ranch," owned by Sweetser & DeLong, the place of my destination, was still nine miles distant, and as it was now dark, I anticipated rather a cheerless ride over the hills.

The four miles of rapid mustang riding had well nigh unsettled all my former exalted views of "the poetry of motion," to say nothing of my loss of confidence in the dignity and sublimity of this kind of locomotion. In spite of my growing and skillful attainments, the spirited mustang derived ways and means to produce too great a degree of friction and this, you know, is sure to spoil the harmony of all mechanism.

While we were berating our condition and inclined to indulge the sentiment expressed—"Who makes his bed of briar and thorn, Must be content to lie forlorn," a felicitious [*sic*] circumstance turned up. An old sea captain had just chartered a livery team to take him over the same

road. Now the captain was fond of sea-room, and had far more confidence in his ability to navigate safely the hills and ravines astride a half-trained mustang than when buttoned into a carriage. So we had no difficulty in swapping crafts, and what brightened the transaction, each believed he had the best of the bargain!

The Captain had no idea of getting water-logged and so whiskeyed [*sic*] up before starting, and with sails set and streamers (long locks) flying, he left his moorings, and was soon gallantly bearing away through the streets of the town, at the rate of ten knots an hour.

We left soon after—drove rapidly over a smooth, hard but circuitous road, the bright stars lending their kind assistance, and the cheerful frogs serenading us—the merry fellows uniting their full volume of voice, in whistling an oratorio, as an evening's entertainment.

We overhauled the fleet craft of the gallant Captain some two miles inside our destination. It was anchored near, and secured by hauser, [*sic*] to a tall signpost, while the dim form of the commanding officer was traceable through the windows, evidently taking in additional freight and discussing the superior merits of mustangs for overland navigation! [*Ed. Note: This might be the Our House saloon located about where Novato Blvd. meets Diablo Ave. today, which was then owned by Henry Jones and Peter Smith.*] By nine o'clock I made my destination, and after partaking of the refreshments, gave myself up to the agreeable stimulus of enlivening conversation around a blazing wood fire in an open fire-place. An hour passed, and we yielded to the embrace of Morpheus, and slept—and rose to look upon the beauties and glories of as fine a morning as had dawned upon the world in 5000 years.

With this view, we offer no apology for giving a concise outline drawing of "Novato Ranch." It contains no



less than 13,000 acres, situated on the west side of San Pablo Bay, thus connecting it by water communication with San Francisco, 25 miles distant. With no expense for land carriage, it is favored with cheap alluvial soil of bottom lands, but extending up onto the low foot-hills which surround it on north, south and west sides.

It is all inclosed [*sic*] by a substantial redwood post and wire fence (wire very large)—the posts were all grown on the ranch, the ravines of which furnish as abundance of wood and timber.

The fence inclosing [*sic*] the ranch is 15 miles in length, and the various cross fences are unitedly [*sic*] 9 miles in length—in all 24 miles—built at an average cost of \$500.00 per mile. About 5 miles of the surrounding fence is maintained by parties owning adjoining lands.

About 125 acres are devoted to Fruit culture. There are 18,000 apple trees (grafted fruit) from 2 to 4 years old; 500 peach trees; from 200 to 300 plum trees; from 250 to 300 quince trees. Of pears, apricot, fig and almond trees some 150; while of grapes there were over 11,000 vines, mostly of California varieties. The Ranch has a good number of never failing springs of pure water, some of which afford a sufficiency for mill seats.

Messrs. Sweetser and DeLong informed me that they now have on the Ranch 1,000 head of cattle—100 of which are cows; 300 horses, old and young, several of which are the get of their celebrated Black Hawk "Novato Chief"; most of these are highly promising colts. [*Ed note: About this same time Henry Jones was advertising his trotting horse, Young Hero, for stud in the Marin Journal newspaper.*]

They have some 1700 sheep, 1000 of which are ewes, and have this season all been crossed with imported Spanish (Vermont bred) Merino Bucks.

Of wheat, oats and barley, they harvested only about 6000 bushels. They cut and put up for market 400 tuns [*sic*] of hay, worth at the present time \$15.00 per tun [*sic*].

The proprietors employ a Foreman, Mr. Stephens, who has been in their employ for the last three years, at a yearly salary of \$500.00 and board. He is a native of Maine, and appears to be active, intelligent, and well-fitted for the position. Other help costs them \$25.00 to \$40.00 per month and board. The shepherd, Mr. Samuel Bingham, a native of Vermont, a young man of industrious and attentive habits to business, and everyway [*sic*] qualified to fill his place with credit to himself and advantage to his employers—receives a salary at present of \$400.00 per year, besides perquisites and board.

The proprietors say the chief drawback to good dividends is the price of labor; but they expect that the steady immigration of laborers from the East will soon remove this obstacle.

The farm buildings consist of a medium sized dwelling-house—a granary—tool shop—blacksmith shop—store house—sheds—and a barn 70 x 50 with a basement for stabling. They are prettily situated on a gen-

tle elevation, which overlooks the entire valley, and sheltered by some half dozen patriarchial [*sic*] oaks, imparting a cheerful aspect to the homestead. The Ranch is intersected by the public road, leading from San Rafael to Petaluma.

The generous and enterprising proprietors of the estate can congratulate themselves on its prospective increasing value. When San Francisco shall have a population of 200,000 which will be the case by 1872 all good farming lands within a radius of 30 miles of the metropolis will possess almost priceless value.

We must briefly allude to our field sports. Mr. D\_\_\_\_\_ is an expert marksman—keeps hounds, and setters and pointers of first quality, and with plenty of game on his own lands, and plenty of leisure to devote to its capture, he derives much rational enjoyment combined with health-giving exercise, and besides, his table is constantly supplied with a variety of wild meats.

We returned to the City in time for Christmas, revived and improved spiritually, socially and physically. The grinding friction of business cares finds its cure in the lubricating breezes, radiant skies, and soft airs of the country.

## Reminiscences from the Ninteen Twenties

Excerpts from an oral history interview with Eleonora Lafranchi taped 3-31-2004.

EL: Eleonora Lafranchi

JAT: John Trumbull

JMcN: Jim McNern

EL: [*talking about the property on Novato Boulevard where she now lives:*] "There was a tree right up there [*indicating the northeast side of the property next to the boulevard*] about halfway. And you could climb up that one. Then there was a huge pine tree here [*Indicating the northwest edge of the property along the boulevard.*]

JAT: That was right off the end of your property?

EL: No, not to the end. It was about halfway.

JAT: No, I mean on your property. We are talking about this lot right here.

EL: Yes it was on the end towards the street on our property. It was on the other side of the fence. But you see we were youngsters, and we had an apple tree. And I remember I used to wear dresses all the time, I remember putting apples in my pocket and climbing the tree and eating the apples. There was a car going by, I'd throw the apple cores at the car.

JAT: That's better than shooting at them the way they do now.

EL: [*laughing*] Of course I don't know if I ever hit one.

JAT: Did your folks ever find out that you were doing that?

EL: Oh, I don't know. Probably not.



JAT: How about your brother? Was he doing it too?

EL: I think I was the only one. I was able to climb the tree in those days. ... I don't remember that my brother ever got in trouble.

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EL: We used to walk to school, but a lot of times Mr. Trumbull would come by. He used to take Bob to school. And he'd come by and if he'd see any of us—Lafranchi-ville, he'd stop to pick us up. Dillena-ville. They lived down the street—he'd pick us up. As many as he could put in the car. He would take us to school. He was really very good. And then coming home from school, we'd be walking on one side of the street and if we saw—you know where that great big new building is, that office building.

JAT: At the corner of Redwood Boulevard and DeLong?

EL: Yes. Well there were cows in there and sometimes there was a bull in there.

JAT: On the hillside.

EL: Yeh. And when the cows were there it was all right, but if we saw the bull we always crossed the street.

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EL: Another thing that was exciting in our early days, was when the Gypsies came to town. When the teachers saw the Gypsies we all had to go into the classroom, because, I guess, there was this idea that the Gypsies stole children. Yeh, so we all had to go inside.

JAT: When the Gypsies came were they just passing through or did they actually stay here for any length of time?

EL: Well, Sometimes they—well sometimes they would stop, you know and maybe get out. But as far as I know they never ever stayed.

JAT: So they weren't pickers or—

EL: No. No.

JAT: They were just passing through.

EL: Yes.

JAT: This is in cars?

EL: Yes.

JAT: They didn't didn't come in wagons.

EL: No. No. We didn't go back that far.

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EL: Sometimes when we would walk home from school we'd go down to the creek—you know down by the bridge. And then there were sometimes a lot of pollywogs down there, so we would go down to the creek and catch pollywogs. Now I don't know what we did with them, but anyway we would put them in a can.

JAT: I guess all of the kids have done that—

EL: [laughing] Oh Gosh!

JAT: Excuse me, but was the creek still deep enough to swim in at that point in time?

EL: I think there was just a hole or so, but at certain times of the year there was quite a bit of water. And I remember in the creek up there when Frank Turpin was still a young kid, we saw trout in there.

JAT: This was up toward Miwok [Park]

EL: No! Right here.

JAT: Right across [Novato Blvd.] by the library.

EL: Yes, but it was up a little bit farther, you know where the—building is now.

JAT: Up by the church?

EL: Well right in through there.

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EL: Years ago, I probably was maybe in the eighth grade, Mrs. Levenworth, who was Mrs. Trumbull's sister, and years ago she had a dance class on Saturday afternoon, and, of course we went—the three of us—went to the dance class. And it was very nice and everything, but all the youngsters—most of us anyway—went to the class. But Edna Baccaglio and I used to love to watch the trains, so we'd sneak out of the dance class and go down. There was a train that came through, I don't know, between three and three thirty, and we'd sneak back of the station to see the train go by, then we'd go back to the dance class.

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JMcN: Where were the dances held?

EL: The dance was held down... Who owns that building... right across the street from Scotts hall—from Scott's store on the same side of Grant but across the street on the corner?

JAT: Hamilton's?

EL: Hamilton's. It was in there.

JAT: Really?

EL: Uh huh.

JAT: Now Loustaneau Hall is where the Druids meet now—that is a two story building, and that was built as a club or as a place for dances and stuff like that, but that is not where they held them though?

EL: No. Not this dance class.

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JMcN: Mrs. Levenworth was Mrs. Trumbull's sister, did you say?

EL: Yes. Do you remember the Browns?

JMcN: I don't think so.

EL: Well, ... Robert Brown was Mrs. Trumbull's brother, and they lived right across the street. And they had the property—where the mortuary is. ... They had a prune orchard, and then they had some other trees, but they had mostly prunes. And I remember when the prunes were ready to be harvested the three of us—and you know a lot of the children from town would go up and pick up prunes, because he had to have somebody to pick up the prunes. And I remember we used to get for—



I don't remember what the weight of the box was, but it was a regular normal box—we got fifteen cents a box for all those prunes, which was a kind of backache [laughing].

JMcN: Who did you pick them for?

EL: Mr. Brown. Robert S. Brown. And that was right across the street from Our Lady of Loretto.

... And then there was a larger box, and for the larger box we got twenty five cents a box. The smaller one was fifteen, the larger one was twenty five. And I remember my sister picking up—you know you needed to pick up an awful lot of prunes to get the price of a pair of shoes. And I remember that she picked enough prunes that she bought—that she was able to buy a pair of shoes for when she went to school. Not that she wouldn't have had shoes, but ... [laughter]

JAT: Was she older or younger than you are?

EL: Older. I was the baby. You know a lot of the youngsters from town would come. It was fun because we all knew each other, and we just—you know, it was just kind of a fun thing. ...

EL: The Browns were our neighbors, and I used to take a quart of milk up to them every night. I'd ride my horse up there. And one time I was coming home, and I had my dress on - you know you didn't bother putting on jeans or anything—and I had three or four empty milk bottles—they were glass in those days—and I was coming down, and the horse was going at a pretty good little clip—well, I was going to have to turn in at the gate—in those days we had the fence and the gate—well, it was only open about like so [indicating about 24 inches].

I wanted to slow her up, so she could come into the gate. Well the dog gone horse bucked ! And I went flying over her head.

JAT: phew! With the milk bottles.

EL: With the milk bottles. ... I remember when they used to have the cattle drives too, and the sheep. Well the first thing we did—"Well here comes the cows!" so the first thing we did was run and close the gate, because at that time we had a fence and then we had this big gate across there, so we had to run and close the gate so the animals wouldn't come in. They brought them in from there [West Marin]. They had their dogs and the guys would be on horseback and they were taking them down to the railroad station to put them in the freight cars, and then I guess they took them to San Francisco.

EL: I remember the night the Community House was opened. I was in the eighth grade, and there was a Mrs. Stanky here at the time. And she had a daughter ...

JMcN: Was that Emily? Was Herman Stanky her husband?

EL: I don't think he was. I can't remember whether the girl's name was Ethel or Emily.

JMcN: It began with an E.

EL: Yeh. For some reason I thought it was Emily, but I can't say for sure. Any way they had this program, and I remember that we did three or four dances, and for each one we were all in costume. We did one—it was a Chinese dance, and we did that to the song "Hi Lilli—Hi Low." ... And then we did one to "Yes, We Have No Bananas" And with that we wore coveralls and I know we had a red bandana and a straw hat. And then we were very sedate and we did—Martha Washington's dance ...

JMcN: Virginia Reel?

EL: Oh—the minuet. We danced the minuet in costumes. And we all dressed like Martha Washington, and the boys dressed like George, and we had wigs and so forth.

And I have a picture in the bedroom that was taken with the dress, but I don't have the wig on.

JAT: That's pretty elaborate costuming. Where'd all that come from?

EL: I don't know.

JAT: Did your folks make it in those days?

EL: No. No. Uh uh.

I don't know where they came from, but I remember that, and that was the night the Community House opened. Some of the people that I remember that were in it—of course Edna and I were in it. We were in almost everything; Edna Baccaglio, Virginia Randolph, Guy Cain, Arnold Heise, um, I don't remember who the others were, but I know we were eighth graders.

JMcN: So this must have been 1926.

JMcN: Now about riding the train to San Rafael High School, you rode the train, the 7:32 train.

EL: Yes.

JMcN: Now can you tell us about that. How many students usually went down from Novato by train? Was it a large number or ...?

EL: It was quite a number, because, see, there were not just freshmen, you know. There were quite a few, but I can't tell you the number.

JMcN: Did you have a ticket that you used, like for the month?

EL: Yeh, we commute.

JMcN: A commute ticket.

EL: Yeh. It was—oh, like so [indicating size about 3x5 inches], and then the conductor would come along and punch—you know, punch out the day.

JMcN: You didn't buy the ticket though, did you? I mean didn't the school provide it?

EL: No. As I recall we had to buy our ticket.

JMcN: Oh, you had to buy it!

EL: I think so.

JMcN: I was thinking, you know, public schools are sending students down there...