

The Novato Historian

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Preserving Novato's History Feature Section

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The Novato Historian

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H. Pini Company Turns 100



By Michael Read

One of Novato's most successful early businessmen was Enrico "Henry" Pini. He left Arbedo in Ticino, Switzerland in 1905 and arrived in the United States on October 14, 1905. Henry went to work for John and Mary Bazzini in the town of Yount in Napa County around 1907. Mary was a neighbor of Henry's in Ticino. The Bazzinis lived in San Francisco in 1900 and probably moved north to establish their dairy and vineyard after the 1906 earthquake. In the 1910 census, Henry Pini is shown working for them. The Bazzinis helped Henry get established as a chicken farmer.

Henry Pini came to Novato in 1912 and on July 20, 1912, he bought 5 acres of land (lot 56) from the Novato Land Company. Lot 56, located at 1755 Novato Blvd. is where the Cedar Creek Apartments are now.

With the help of Bazzinis, Henry was very successful, building up a fine establishment and having five thousand chickens.

In 1913, Henry Pini was selling varmint scalps to the County of Marin for \$22,85. On March 28, 1914 he bought 5.03 acres more, (Lot 90) on the corner of Tamalpais and Center. He grew vegetables on the property. On May 20, 1916, Henry bought five more acres (Lot 89). One suspects that Mrs. Mary Bazzini put up the money for him to buy these lots.

Sometime in 1916, Mary and Henry opened a vegetable store to help him sell his homegrown produce. They opened this store in the Verissimo building at 813 Grant Avenue, currently where the Masa Sushi restaurant is now.

We know it was 1916 because the Marin IJ would report on November 16, 1916. "S. Wolf, a San Francisco produce peddler, was arrested by Under Sheriff Redding and taken to Novato to face charges of obtaining money under false pretenses preferred by Mr. Pini of Novato, who purchased a truckload of potatoes from Wolf."

According to Thomas Keena, in his "oral history" to the Novato History Museum (April 1980), on the store's opening day "Mr. Pini had started the grocery and vegetable business. He had very few things. He had too many vegetables on the place there, so he started a store he told me. He phoned to San Francisco and got some bananas and pineapples and things like that to fill up the store and make a good impression the first day. So, at the end of the day he had more than he had taken in. But he stuck it out, he said, and little by little business picked up."

The phone call to San Francisco was probably to Mary Bazzini's family. They ran a big fruit store in the city called "A. Berta Fruit and Vegetable Company" on Montgomery Street.



Mrs. Mary Bazzini and Henry Pini in their first store.

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H. Pini & Company second store from 1917 to 1929

Mr. Keena goes on and said, “Well, the hay press was bailing hay in those days. You know where that Los Alandros tract is? That was all fields and they were bailing hay and at Black Point and all those places. It was summer time and they had cook houses and they’d come and bale hay. So Pini used to visit the cook houses and get an order for groceries. He’d tell the guy, “Don’t come to town. I’ll get the stuff for you.” So, then he delivers the stuff out to him. That’s when he really got started. The station got full of groceries. He started really a grocery store.”



Picture of Thomas Keena’s business card

In 1917, the store moved into the Gambetta building which was built in 1914. It was later sold to W.T. Simmons, who watched the building burn down in 1958 when the Rayburns and Moore stores were in the building. Now Five Little Monkeys, Flour Chylde Bakery, Albor Medical Solutions and Bicycle Brustop are in the building today.

Mr. William Cole

Probably no name is better known to long-time Novato residents than that of William E. Cole, who first came to this area in 1913 as the Novato station agent for the Northwestern Pacific Railroad.

A native Californian, Bill Cole was born in

Capay, Yolo County, in 1891. His father was a farmer and young Bill attended elementary school in Yolo County and in Arizona before graduating in Humboldt County.

With high schools at remote distances, Bill decided to enter Business College at Sacramento and eventually transferred to Polytechnic Business College in Oakland. He began his employment with the Northwestern Pacific in 1908. In 1915, Bill Cole was married to the former Elodie Shreve, of San Francisco and moved into the family home at 866 Railroad Avenue.

Mr. Cole was one of the founders of the Novato Chamber of Commerce in 1915. He, along with Dr. Walter Busher and Louis Nave, organized the Novato Fire District in 1926. He served as its director until 1931. He was active in the insurance business and was one of the organizers of the North Marin Association of Insurance Agents. He was also doing the books for Pini before he worked for the Pini Company.

As the station agent, Mr. Cole worked seven days a week for 12 hours a day at a salary of about \$60 a month. He had no holidays off – not even Christmas – but he did get two weeks’ vacation a year. Having observed for five years the huge amounts of feed and grain which were being shipped into Novato by the NWP, he decided to go into the feed business. Mr. Keena said it this way in his oral history story. “The warehouse in the railroad depot was jammed with merchandise and Mr. Cole was the station agent. He got hold of Pini one day and he said, “Pini, get your merchandise out of here. The railroad company want me to tell you get

your things out of here and pay your bills of lading.” Pini said, “I can’t. I’m too busy. Business is too good. I can’t keep up with it.” So Cole said, “Why don’t you hire someone?” So Pini told me this himself. ‘That’s where I made my mistake,’ Pini said. ‘I hired him right there over a cracker barrel. We drew up an agreement that he was going to come to work for me and I’d raise his wages \$50 a month over what he was getting as a station agent.’ And they put at the bottom of the paper that he couldn’t fire him within two years. He put that stipulation in.”

June 15, 1918

The Marin Journal on June 13, 1918 reported, “Station agent W.E. Cole will abdicate his position and enter into the mercantile business on June 15th, as partner with H. Pini & Company. Mr. Cole has had previous experience in this line at Sacramento and is a hustler.”

The partnership was made up of Henry Pini, W.E. Cole and Mrs. Mary Bazzini. In 1919 R. H. Trumbull bought the new firm a warehouse in his lumberyard and a mixer, grinder, and re-cleaner were installed in what was to be temporary quarters. The site is now occupied by the Novato Lumber Company.



Picture of Grand Opening Ad

The young partners of H. Pini & Company prospered and was branching out into new fields — a butcher store in 1919 and a hardware department in 1920.

October 1920, the Pini & Co. bought the old Miller property for the purpose of erecting a reinforced concrete feed mill where chick and dairy feed would be prepared. In January 1922 construction began by

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Rocca & Caletti. Mr. Phillips received the contract for filling in the basement of the new H. Pini & Co., warehouse on DeLong Avenue near the railroad station. Whole Foods is now in that location.

The firm was organized into a corporation (C0098379) on March 28, 1922. It was named the H Pini & Company, Inc., with Henry Pini as president and W. E. Cole as vice president. On the board of directors were Mary Bazzini, R. H. Trumbull, and A. H. Mills. It had a capital stock of \$50,000. A year later the capital stock was increased to \$100,000.



H. Pini & Company's third store from 1929 to April 19, 1945 - when a fire destroyed the building.

Mr. Keena would say. "Pini's second store was where the billiard place is (Simmons building). And all the people, when they moved to Novato, had little backyard chicken flocks. So they all had a lot of eggs for sale. So, Pini used to take the eggs. They'd bring them inside in buckets and Pini would buy the eggs from them. He'd give you credit for them on your grocery bill. Everybody had credit in those days. Everybody charged everything and at the end of the month they'd pay the bill. So, he developed an awfully big business. But these people were bringing all these extra eggs and then they'd take it out in groceries. So, business kept going and got two fellows working in the back of the store. That was before the poultry producers even came into being. They were big operators. So Pini used to case the eggs and send them to San Francisco."

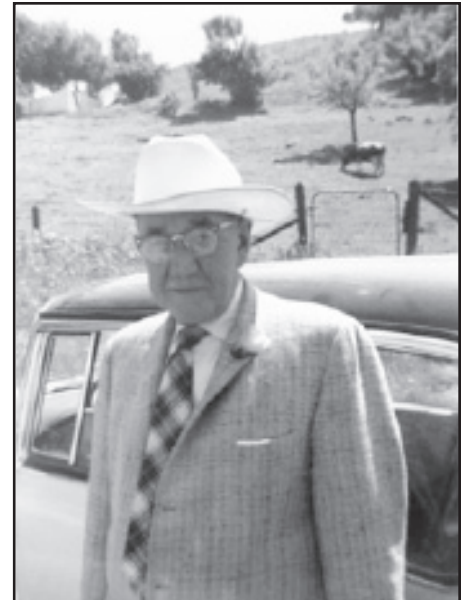
"Then the people used to buy chicken feed from Pini. And he kept the chicken feed in a

warehouse in back of the store. Business got so good and there was so much chicken feed sold that they had that warehouse that's in back of that lumber yard down there, you know the big building that's in back? They rented that and filled it up with chicken feed and cow feed and business still kept growing. So, they decide to build a feed mill. When they decided to build a feed mill the bill was running so high for all the hardware, the nuts and bolts and so forth, that Mr. Cole said, "We might as well start a hardware store too. We're the best customers in town. We might as well get our own hardware business." So that's

how they started the hardware business." Keena went to work for them in 1923.

On July 21, 1923, the *Novato Advance* reported: "Recognizing the importance of this section of Marin County and the future of Novato as a great business center, H. Pini & Co. has purchased from J. Verismo the four lots on Grant Avenue (Novato Theatre) near Nave's garage and will build a modern concrete store and warehouse. This is a good stroke of business, for it not only gives the local corporation room to expand but a most desirable business location. The H. Pini Company is composed of shrewd, far-seeing business people who take advantage of legitimate opportunities, and the proposed step will not only help themselves but be a benefit to Novato as a whole."

On November 1923, the *Novato Advance* reported "The H. Pini & Co. are preparing to enlarge and extend their business.



William Cole

The old Community House (old Hamilton Bros. store) has been rented and is being overhauled. A large and well-equipped room is being made for the post office, which will be moved as soon as permission is granted and the building ready. The remainder of the building will be used by H. Pini & Co. to carry their stock of heavy hardware. The present quarters of the company will be used for a large stock of light hardware. The grocery and vegetable department will occupy the building now being used by the post office. These changes will give the H. Pini & Co. ample room for the different departments of their business and be convenient for their customers." The hardware store opened on January 15, 1924.

On October 18, 1928, the *Petaluma Argus-Courier* reported "Pini & Company, one of the leading business firms of Novato, will soon start the construction of a reinforced concrete building on their property on Grant Avenue. The plans call for a structure 100x180 feet which will be used by the big business concern for the grocery, hardware and furniture departments." The contract would go to R.E. Murphy.

February 1, 1929 would see the grand opening of their new store with four big departments - grocery, feed, butcher and hardware stores. In 1933 Pini's would add a dry-goods and a meat market.

1933 would also see the death of Mr. Cole's only child, a son Sheve would pass

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away after a car crash. And in 1940 one of the board of directors A.H. Mills died. Also in 1940, in an earlier story in the *Historian*, it was noted that Mr. and Mrs. Pini were not getting along and Mrs. Pini was selling everything she owned.

The hardware store was sold to Supervisor R.A. Thompson, Thompson's wife Natalie Holly, Douglas D. Phillips and C. Baxter Hovis in 1943. The meat department was sold to Harry Hale and Mr. Thompson. The clothing department to J. C. Foisey, and the food department to Ida Trabucchi, then known as "Ida's Grocery".

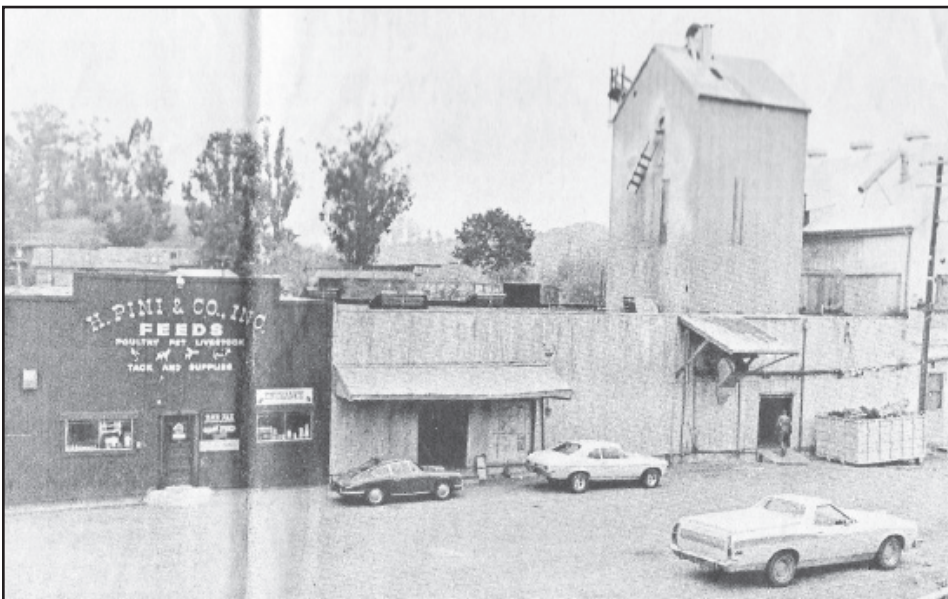
On September 1, 1944, the *Novato Advance* had a legal notice that said a partnership was formed under the name Pini Hardware Company on August 15, 1944. The Feed Mill would stay with Mr. Cole, along with the corporation name "H. Pini & Co. Inc." In 1945, Ray Hill Sr. bought into the corporation and was named president. Mr. Cole was still the secretary and manager.

A July 1957 *Novato Advance* story reported "Novato's oldest 'industry,' the H. Pini & Co. feed mill, continues to thrive. The busi-

ness has not suffered by the coming of suburbia to North Marin. It is prospering and growing. ... Despite the fact that 32 dairies between Sausalito and Novato have disappeared since the firm started operations, volume has remained up. One of the big reasons probably is that the number of cows on the county's dairies has not materially decreased. More cows are run on a reduced acreage. This probably is being accomplished because of the better-balanced foods, provided by such firms as H. Pini & Co. That the Pico products (Pini Company) are sold on the basis of solid reputation and respect within the dairy business is attested by William E. Cole, one of the founders of the business and still its manager."

William C Cole died in 1964. After Cole's death, the corporation had R.M. Hill Jr. as President and R.J. Busher as Secretary. The H. Pini & Co., Inc. came to an end in March 1976, when Bank of America, which operated as trustor of the estate of the late Ray Hill Sr., former principal stockholder of the business, closed the estate. The closure sent 16 employees to unemployment and the end of H. Pini & Co. Inc.

Pini Hardware, Inc. was incorporated on September 19, 1969, and the story about Pini Hardware from the 1940's and on will be in a future *Historian* feature story.



1978 picture the Pini Mill. Sign read "H. Pini & Co., Inc. Feeds, Poultry, Pet, Livestock, Tack and Supplies."



In the 1980's other owners would use the Pini name for the feed mill. This picture shows how the feed mill had moved next door .