

The Novato Historian

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Preserving Novato's History Feature Section

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Novato in the Twenties - nice, but not easy

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When you were hungry, you reached up and picked an apple or an apricot from the nearest tree.

When you felt like cooling off, you went for a swim in the deep water of the creek near where Nave Shopping Center is now.

When you wanted to get together with friends, you strolled into town and headed for the nearest lighted window.

When you climbed a hill, you looked down on a valley carpeted with apple, apricot, or pear blossoms.

That was Novato in the 20's.

"It was Paradise, and now we have to share it," said Tom Keena.

He and his brother Bernard and their sister, Margaret McNern, were reminiscing about the old days — mainly the 20's — as we sat around the breakfast table at Bernard's home on McClay Road.

All three have houses on the land their father, Michael Keena, bought in 1910, when the Novato Land Company started selling off thousands of acres for chicken ranches and small orchards.

At first they lived in San Francisco and came to Novato only on vacations and weekends. They would get off the train at the depot and hire a horse at the livery stable to get to their property. (Later you could ride a jitney all over town for five cents.)

The family moved here in 1919. Tom had come a year earlier with his aunt, who built a house across the street.

Land sold for \$100 an acre in those days, and for only \$50 on Ridge Road, where the Keenas grazed their dairy cows. (They sold milk to the cheese factory.) There were many lots for sale along the highway, but it was hard to get a buyer at any price for those.

There was no electricity — it didn't come in until the early 30's — so everybody used coal oil lamps. There was no ice, either. Meat that was to be preserved had to be salted. Usually they bought meat at the store or went outdoors and killed a chicken.



In the old days, residents of Novato usually took the train when they commuted. The Northwestern Pacific train depot in Novato was a hub of activity. Pictured above: Novato students of the 1920's getting off the train at the end of a day at San Rafael High School. In the morning they often shared the train with calves, chickens, fruit and milk that had been taken aboard at Novato.

It was a small town where everybody knew everybody else. If you needed to have something bought for you in town, you could leave an order in the mailbox and Theda Bugeia, mail carrier for 40 years, would bring it by horse and buggy on her next delivery.

The breadwagon and fishwagon made regular deliveries. The French bread would be left on a hook near your gate.

The roads were all dirt, and they were a slippery morass during the rainy season. When Michael Keena was thinking of driving from San Rafael to Novato in the rainy season, he would phone the station agent in Novato to see if any cars had gotten through. The worst spot was St. Vincent's Hill, where the steep, slippery road often proved impassable.

There weren't enough bridges in Novato. There were many spots where you had to ford a creek. One of the worst was on Sutro Avenue.

In good weather roads could be impassable for another reason. Sometimes they were filled with herds of sheep and cows being driven to the railroad depot. Doug Thompson of the Marin French Cheese Factory was one of those who drove sheep to the railroad.

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Novato in the 1920's. Top picture is looking east down Grant Avenue, with the Scott building on the right. Bottom picture is looking west down Grant Avenue with the Scott building on the left.



The winter floods often inundated the area now occupied by Safeway, Mission Lodge and the trophy shop on Grant Avenue. When the rains came the people who lived on Deer Island had to use a boat to get their milk to market. "It was a nice life," said Margaret, "but not an easy one."

She remembers that there were wildflowers everywhere — mostly poppies and lupine. The ground was covered with fruit at certain times of the year, and children helped themselves to it.

The slopes of Mt. Burdell were covered with trees, mostly oak. Many of them were chopped down for firewood, and the rest succumbed to the fires that

blackened Novato's hills almost every summer.

Tom recalls that there were coyotes in the hills. He said a gamekeeper on the Hill Ranch caught wildcats, which were sold to a buyer in Chinatown.

The Keenas went to Grant Avenue School, housed in a building that is now a used furniture store on Sweetser Avenue.

Said Tom: "We played ball where the Community House is now. We had to push the preacher's horse and cow to one side to make room for the game." His teacher, Lu Sutton, umpired the ball games. One of the best players was his

classmate Babe Silva, later a mayor of Novato.

Every Christmas a platoon of students climbed a Novato hillside and cut down a Christmas tree for the school.

What did they do for fun in those pre-television days? Well, they went to the movies at the old Community House at Grant and Sherman Avenue. There the ladies swooned at "The Sheik" and other favorites.

They danced to the music of the player piano at the Community House, and boys met girls at the dances at Druids Hall. Margaret recalls dancing the Chamarita at IDESI Hall - a Portuguese tradition.

They picnicked on the Russian River. They applauded the vaudeville acts at the California Theater in Petaluma. They lingered over sodas at the drug store fountain on Grant Avenue.

They played musical instruments, and so did some of their elders — evidence that a "music man" had come through selling musical instruments.

They whiled away the hours in card games. Said Tom: "If there was a light on in town we headed for it."

Later, in the 30's, Margaret and many others emoted in Dramatic Club plays.

They went to the Halloween party given for the community by Robert Trumbull, who lived in the Novak



The second Novato school built in 1873 where the Novato Police Station is now on Machin Ave. The structure was moved in November 1922 after the Grant Ave. school was built. The new location was at the corner of Sweetser Ave. and Redwood Blvd. where F.L.Tainter operated his ware house and used furniture establishment the Novato Salvage Co.,

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mansion. The garden was decorated with paper lanterns for the occasion. Trumbull was manager of the Novato Land Company and was one of the wealthiest people in town. He had maids and a cook, and he picked up his daughter, Helen, and her friends at school in his stylish Chandler motor car.

After finishing grammar school, the Keena children took the 7:30 train each morning to San Rafael High School. While the Novato students were scrambling aboard, cargoes of eggs, cheese, milk, calves, live chickens, fruit, mail, deer, firewood and grapes were being loaded. All this while some passengers were still abed in the Pullman car.

The railroad depot was the center of Novato life and of all the comings and goings. The townspeople told time by the train whistles.

The town looked like the set for a Western movie, and they didn't have to change a thing when a San Rafael movie company filmed a cowboy movie here. There were wooden sidewalks and hitching posts at intervals, especially in front of the five saloons strung out over two blocks.

Geese swam in the water holes on Grant Avenue and dogs lay in the street all day long. There were oak trees in the street in front of what is now the Novato Theater — you had to drive around them.

Grant Avenue ended at the highway. West of the highway was a ranch where the Gambetta's kept their cows. There was a gate you could open if you wanted to get to Novato Boulevard, then called Hicks Valley Road.

H. Pini & Co. was the "biggest thing in town" for 10 or 15 years, according to Tom, who worked for Pini for 17 years. Henry Pini and his wife Maria opened a grocery store in the building on Grant Avenue that is now a pool hall. They kept adding new departments with the help of Bill Cole, who gave up his job as station agent at the depot to team up with the enterprising Pini. They incorporated in 1922 and started selling stock.

With Pini, one thing led to another. He ran out of space for storing chickenfeed and hay (he was using barns all over town) so he built a feed mill — the



The 1920's saw a brand new school on Grant Avenue (above), Louis Nave opened his new Nave Garage across the street (below).



one that now stands near DeLong Avenue. He was upset about the cost of hardware for the mill, so he set up his own hardware department, run by Cole.

By 1929, when he built a store on the site of the Novato Theater, he was selling "everything you could want," including meat and clothing. His assets were bigger than those of the Novato Bank, according to Tom.

When the store burned down during

World War II the whole town changed, said Tom. The hardware store was rebuilt west of the highway, paving the way for a shift of the business district to the west side of the highway. The hardware store and the feed mill were the only parts of the business that survived. Pini died around that time, and he had no children to carry on the business.

The Keenas recall some of the town characters like Petaluma Charlie, who was killed by a bull, and Una Wada, a gardener who was brought from Japan

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by the Burdells.

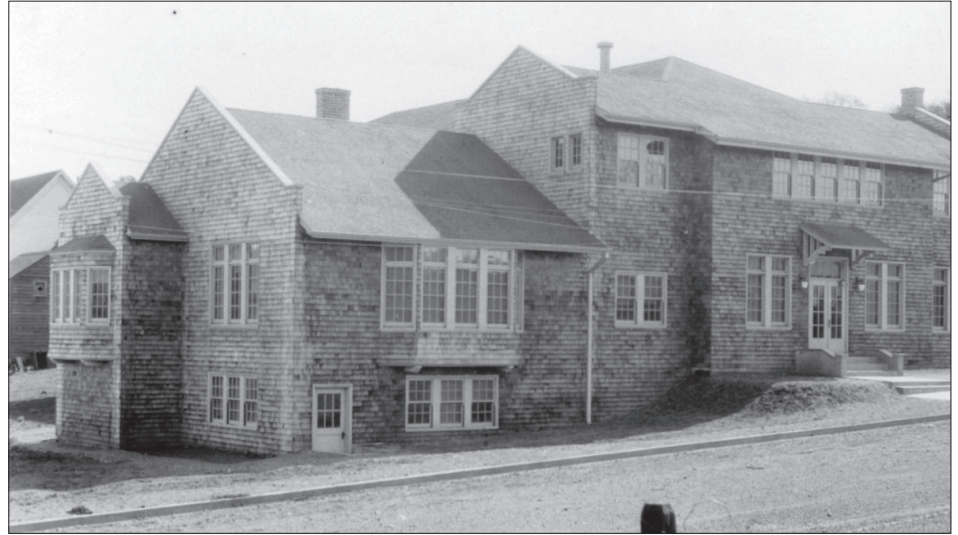
They recall the telephone switchboard when there were only 28 telephones in town. The switchboard was in the building that now houses Warden's Liquor, and Kitty Chapman, the switchboard operator, slept there at night.

They recall the changes brought to Novato by Prohibition. Stills cropped up in the wooded hills, and sometimes the bootleggers fought it out with hijackers. McGovern's Saloon (now Marin Color II) was converted into a boys' club where kids could play handball and do some boxing. But some people said the main change brought by Prohibition was that you entered saloons by the back door instead of the front.

The Depression also brought changes. There was a hobo hangout near the depot where a fire was kept going for hobo stew (often made with groceries given away by Pini). Tramps who came in on the train riding in boxcars gathered around the fire. Sometimes they slept under a bridge.

Pini, unable to get renters for his houses, let tenants live in them rent-free if they would keep the weeds cut.

But Novatans were used to being



In the 1920s the Novato Community House was built (Aug. 1923), the Black Point cut-off was constructed, and H. Pini & Co. built a mill/warehouse and a new store (where the Novato Theatre is now). Novato would have its own newspaper (*Advance* July 1922) once more.

without much money, the Keenas said. And with food so plentiful it was a better place than many to weather the Depression.

For many years the town remained much the same, but Hamilton Field "changed everything." Many of the men stationed there liked Novato and returned to settle down. "That's when the homes came in."

It was never to be the same.

Tom stayed here, working for Pini and later at Mare Island. Bernard moved to San Francisco in 1937, worked at the post office for 37 years, and returned here after his retirement. Margaret moved away for three years but then came back and stayed. She worked for Pini for about 10 years.

They talked about their father, who went to Alaska (the Klondike) in 1897 in search of gold and returned there every summer for years. (He sailed back into San Francisco harbor one year to find the city leveled - it was shortly after the earthquake.)

He may not have found gold in the Klondike, but the 20 acres in Novato that he bought back in 1910 were the closest thing to it.



The Keenas in 1977: Tom, Margaret and Bernard. In the background is the property their father Michael Keena bought in 1910 on McClay Road.



The Keenas in the 1920s.