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Growing up in The Old Yellow House

By Ezra Nelson

My parents, Charles A. and Karen M. Nelson, with their four children moved over from Albany California to what was then called Moraga Valley in June, 1918. Their two sons and two daughters at the time were from almost five years to six months of age. The flu epidemic was the driving force behind this move. Six years later I was born missing out on the way things were at first.

My father tried his hand at farming by purchasing two work horses and some farming equipment from a nearby rancher. There were also two cows and a well-trained dog named Bobby. This dog when told to would bring in the cows from the field and even the chickens. Papa raised hay across the road.

The four children, Earl, Mabel, Clyde and Clara all started school in the one room Moraga Valley School across the road. Their teacher was Mrs. Madden who for a time lived in one of our downstairs rooms. Some of her students came to school on horseback.

My father had a phone put in the house. He worked for Moore Shipyard in Oakland and rode a Thor motorcycle which was kept in front hall. My brother Earl remembered papa once taking him as a youngster to the dentist in Oakland. He put Earl in front riding on the gas tank. They went up over the Old Tunnel Road through the dimly lit tunnel and down the long curvy road to town. The motorcycle had a gas head lamp that would be lit with a wad of burning paper before starting out.

These were some of the things I missed. Changes happen as time goes by. The cows had to be destroyed because of an outbreak of hoof and mouth disease. The horses were sold. A new two room Orinda Union School was opened in 1925 putting an end to the long history of the one across the road. My father bought a new 1923 Model T Ford roadster and his motorcycling days were over. The road going by our house was made into a paved but narrow two lane concrete highway in 1922. Sad to say the phone was gone.

But the feeling of a small family farm went on. Toward the back to the right stood the tall barn with its long sloping roof on the north side and the shorter one on the south. There was a good sized fruit orchard of pears, apples, cherries, peaches, quinces, a few grape vines and quite a large corn field across the creek. Mama always had her small flock of chickens. Papa began to make good use of the creek by building a rock and concrete dam and spillway to hold back the gravel that washed down every winter. He would strain the gravel and use it for construction jobs he did in Orinda.

From about where we lived and covering much of the land in Moraga were many pear orchards owned by the Moraga Land Company. In summer we worked on the pear job. The men did the picking and the women sorted. Picking would start toward the end of July and go on for three or four weeks. We were paid when the job was finished. Hours were from 7 to 5:30 with an hour for lunch. The pay was around 2.00 a day, more or less, depending on the market price. Most of the crop was sold to Del Monte Cannery.

Speaking of pear orchards brings to mind a beautiful scene I once saw while coming out from Oakland to Moraga on the Sacramento Northern electric train. As it was slowly rounding the Valle Vista curve I looked out the window and spread out on the flat land below were some of those large pear orchards in full bloom. It was an unforgettable sight. There were a number of family farms also on land owned by the Moraga Company. They were tended to by hard working Portuguese families who struggled to make a living on their hay and dairy ranches. The hills all around were covered with neatly kept hay fields. When fully grown the hay would be cut, left to dry a few days, then raked into long rows, stacked and finally pressed into large hay bales by the hay press crew. Horses were the beast of burden for all this work.

Sometimes wheat instead of hay would be grown. The threshing machine had an interesting power mechanism. The rear wheel of a small truck would be raised up, a long drive belt attached to it and that would power the thresher. It was a very noisy job.

There would sometimes be large cattle drives going by on the highway driven along by four or five cowboys. It was wonderful to see something like this. There was very little automobile traffic then but the cattle had right of way over any car that did come along.

Some of my earliest recollections of family life was when my father was putting a concrete and rock foundation under the house. All of us had a part in hauling out the excavated dirt and bringing gravel up out of the creek. It was all done by wheel barrow and hand labor.

Here would be a good place to give some first-hand information of those times taken from a diary my brother Earl kept in 1928. For 10-10-28 it reads: "Papa is digging out the cellar. When I came home he was using a coal oil lamp for light. I fixed a wiring so he could have an electric light in the cellar." And then for 10-25-28 he wrote, "I did not work in the (service) station this afternoon, and therefore I went to Moraga to see the St. Mary's College. This was the first time that I have seen the college since it has been built. I watched the football team play football. The road to the college is very rough; I had to crawl along in second gear on my motorcycle so as not to break my back. I think they will pave the road soon. When I came home and ate, we all worked in the cellar and we took out 16 wheelbarrows of dirt. That broke last night's record by one load. We quit at 8:30 and went to bed."

My father also dug by hand the well in the basement. He made it four feet in diameter and lined it with bricks. The water was used for all purposes: drinking, washing and watering the plants. The well still has plenty of water but the hand pump needs repair.

Many have wondered about this house: "Who built it and when? Why is it so close to the road?" I once asked my mother if she knew who built it. She told me it was built by Captain Jenkins. Then she said something about his liking the barn but not the house. So I kind of thought that may have been one reason he didn't stay there long. From what I have been able to find out the house dates back to around 1894. My brother Clyde once said "If that house could only talk!" It surely would be interesting to know more of its beginnings.

Here are some of its features. It has eight comfortably sized rooms: four upstairs and four down. The central stairway just off the front door goes to the four bedrooms up above. The stair well is protected by a well-made redwood railing. Ceilings are ten feet high. The second floor rooms have roof angles that slope down to about four feet above the floor which gives a cozy feeling in rainy weather.

The house was originally built with a full length back porch having a roof over it and a store room at one end. After about thirty or forty years the roof was removed and never rebuilt. The view from the porch was expansive, with orchards, hayfields, pasture lands and wooded hillsides in all their natural setting. Looking northwest you could see hills that were at least ten miles away. Now you can't anymore with all the trees and houses around. It makes one realize how some of the better things of life are longed for after they are gone.

Every year at the beginning of spring the swallows would come and built their nesting places of mud under the eaves of both the barn and the house. Even though they made a lot of mess they were always a welcome sight.

One of the modern conveniences we got in the early thirties was an Atwater Kent radio. Before that my brother Earl had been having fun with a crystal set that had to be used with earphones.

Along about 1936 all that was once farm country began giving way little by little to land developers and house building. The onslaught of progress led to the gradual widening and resurfacing of Moraga Way. The highway was not as close to the house to begin with as it is now. Each repaving brought it a few feet closer. The edge of Moraga Way is now where the picket fence once stood.

The Nordquists bought the old school house property across the road in 1930. Every weekend they would drive out from Oakland and work on it. They had one son, Bob, who was my age. We had great times together exploring the hills, fields, woods and creeks. Sometimes after a good rain we would go out in the woods and pastures to hunt mushrooms. His mother always went with us because she knew the edible ones. They had a swimming pool which was built in a small creek that came down through their property. It gave us lots of summertime enjoyment. My father was given the job of enlarging that pool.

It was always a good experience to hike up over Nordquist's hill and visit the Domingo ranch. It was privately owned and they had horses, milk cows, pigs, goats, chickens, and best of all was their homey hospitality. They separated the milk, sold the cream and used the skim milk for the hogs. The cream was carted in 5 gallon cans and shipped out by train from the Moraga Depot. When I was around ten my father once borrowed their team of work horses to do some plowing and grading. He let me help him do the work and taught me how to hold the reins. The Domingo ranch covered some 400 acres of what is now called Gateway Valley. The buildings are no longer standing.

I went to the Orinda Union School. It had two classrooms of grades 1-4 in one and 5-8 in the other. Both rooms had coal burning stoves for heat. There was also a kitchen, a library, rest rooms and a large auditorium.

From 1937 to 1941 I went to Mt. Diablo High School in Concord. It took the students coming from Canyon at this end to Port Chicago at the other. The first two years I rode the Sacramento Northern school train to get there getting on at Moraga. The last two years I found other ways of transportation because it was discovered I was not in the Mt. Diablo School District and not entitled to free transportation. Acalanes High School opened in 1940 but I chose to stay on at Diablo. When High School days ended in 1941 the offer of a machine shop job was given by a kind neighbor and I gladly took it.

And that tells a little something about my growing up in the somewhat sheltered but difficult days of the great depression. I have purposely left out the darker aspects of those trying times. It is better to remember it as the plain and simple country living that it was and a bit on the rugged side. Looking back on it they were for the most part good days and home was a good place in which to learn some of life's realities in these parts as it was then.

Addendum:

The Moraga Pear Orchards

The pear orchards of the Moraga Land Company were on acreage stretching from Burton Valley in Lafayette to about a mile from the Orinda Cross Roads. They were numbered from 1 to 27, some very large, some small. Scattered here and there among some of the rows would be apricot, apple and plum trees. In Burton there was one orchard that alternated with pear and walnut trees.

The foreman who managed these orchards the year around was Otto Munsterer. He came from Germany and started working for the still young company in 1928. Otto married Mabel Nelson in 1940. She is the present owner of the old Nelson house.

During the picking season workers were made up mostly of transients. They came to Moraga via the Sacramento Northern train and were housed in rows of tents set up where the Safeway parking lot is now. They were provided three hearty meals a day in the "cook house" This building is now used as a restaurant. It is across the street from the parking lot. The old buildings and barns still standing are a gentle reminder of those bucolic days.

The pears were sorted and trucked to the cannery in Emeryville. Before the new tunnel opened in 1937 the route was over the old tunnel road, a long narrow winding stretch through the east bay hills.

During World War II when farm laborers became scarce the company brought in "braceros" from Mexico. They were excellent workers.

Along about 1954 the company was sold to Utah Construction Company and by then a steady downsizing was underway. Moraga was becoming residential and all those days of dry land farming was to become a thing of the past.

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