

# Millers one of the original Danish families in Pajaro Valley



**Betty Lewis**

That was Watsonville

There has been a Danish community in the Pajaro Valley for many years and I was delighted when Gary Miller Soper brought me much of the Miller family history along with photographs, ledger and diary. His paternal grandfather, Peter Madsen Miller, was born in Denmark on January 19, 1868 though, at that time, because of boundary disputes it was under the name of the Empire of Germany.

In the late 1880s, Peter came to California and ended up in Watsonville where he married Margrethe So-



Max and Art Miller, circa 1928, with their catch from a waterfowl hunt in Los Banos.

ing on the Lusitania, another fa-



From left, Marie, Max, Anna, Ben, Frank, Margrethe and Peter Miller, at the Miller ranch in Larkin Valley, 1905.

rensen in 1895. She had been born in Denmark in 1874. A farm was purchased in the Larkin Valley area and seven children were born to the couple between 1896 and 1908.

Peter became lonesome for his home country so he gathered together his family, sold the farm and went back to Denmark where he again went into farming. But Margrethe and the children were homesick for California and bad weather plus other problems did not make for a good year at the farm. Child number eight was born — Lily in September of 1911 — Gary Soper's mother. Peter bowed to his family's wishes and the Millers, now numbering 10, journeyed to England, after selling the farm, to book passage for America — the year was 1912.

And now comes a very interesting part of the Miller story. Peter stood in a long line, at Liverpool, to buy tickets for the family's passage to America. He waited for over an hour and, just as he was within a few feet of the window, the ticket seller hung out a sign — "gone to lunch — back in an hour." Peter's temper flared and he stomped off to another steamship company to buy tickets thus keeping his family from sailing on the Titanic! They were a poor family and would have been in steerage where very few people escaped a watery grave. Sail-

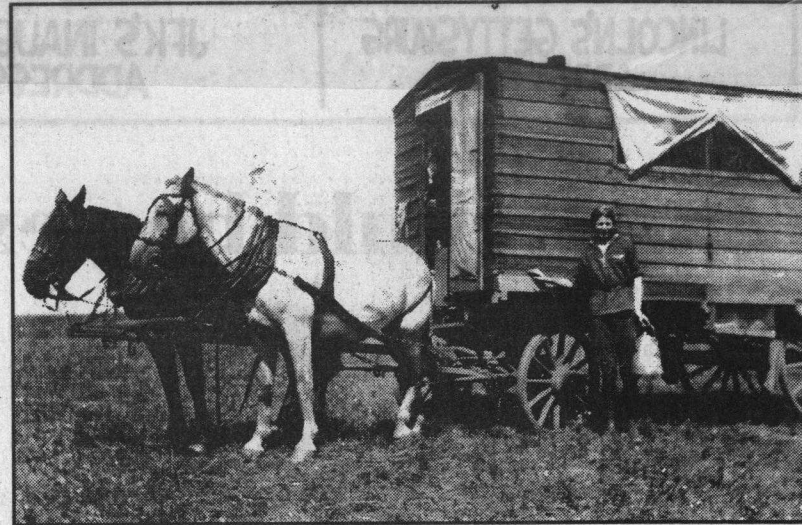
ing was a long and arduous journey by ship that was to be sunk in 1915, the family arrived safely in New York.

Returning to Watsonville, Peter purchased a ranch then located on and around where Rolling Hills School is now located. The family was in the hay baling business along with tractor work plus there was a pear orchard, many other fruits and vegetables, cattle, pigs, chickens, etc. Tragedy struck in 1913 when Peter Miller died at the age of 43, leaving behind his wife and eight children — Marie, Ben, Anna, Max, Frank, Jim, Arthur and Lily.

Ben, being the oldest boy, became the man of the house. In 1919, Ben, Max and Frank went into business together as the Miller Brothers and they hauled hay, did tractor work plus apple and apricot orchard management. They would also prune, spray and trim trees and supervise picking crews.

Anna would cook for the work crew and take the chuck wagon out to the workers at lunch time — this was their main meal of the day. She eventually married Bill Lasher. After his death she married Oscar Von Schell and I am sure people remember her many, many years of winning ribbons at the Santa Cruz County Fair.

In 1923 the Miller Company was disbanded and Ben and Max continued to work on the home farm while



Anna Miller (Lasher/Von Schell) by a chuck wagon, circa 1920.

Frank, who never married, worked as a truck driver and as a farm worker. Marie moved to San Francisco in the early 1920s and worked as a secretary for the Southern Pacific Railroad. Arthur also remained a bachelor and played baseball in Watsonville. He was invited to a try-out by the Pacific Coast League Portland Beavers but declined.

Jim graduated from U.C. Davis and was employed as a butter maker for the Mission Creamery located on Main Street. He then worked for food processors in Watsonville as a quality control supervisor. Lily,

the youngest and the only one born in Denmark, married Harold Soper who was born in Santa Cruz 95 years ago. Of the six Miller offspring who married, 14 children were born and 12 are living today.

All that remains of the Miller farm is a small grove of eucalyptus trees that can be seen from Green Valley Road. Two of the Miller's neighbors in those early years were Charlie Kralj and Fred Hesselwood and the Miller men worked, when needed, for such families as Hansen, McGowan, Morse, Nyland, Mello, Cunha, Hrepich, Struve, Simas,



The Miller Brothers hay press.

Jensen, Durcovich, Sandholdt, Peterson, Mason, Prescott, Neilsen and Lasher.

In the Miller ledger book are many interesting items — Max Miller paid \$20 for a sorrel horse in 1920; meals for three persons at \$1.00 each; eight loaves of bread for \$1.20; overalls, \$3.00. One page in 1924 is labeled — To Mother. She received a check for \$200 and cash for \$40 in two months. Such purchases as gum, shoes, salve and collar pads are all listed — a very meticulous record as was needed on a very limited income. Much of their

food was home grown and the boys fished and hunted game for the dinner table.

Life was hard on the farm in those early years — everyone had to work together and for the good of all — especially when the head of the house died at such an early age and the oldest child only 17. The Miller descendants and other Danish families are to be commended for their extensive contributions to the Pajaro Valley.

Betty Lewis, a local historian, is a contributing columnist to the Register-Pajaronian.