

He's Mr. History in the Midcounty

By CAROLYN
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Studies of Santa Cruz County's history are more in vogue now than ever before — almost as if the paths of the past are welcome and secure backsteps for local communities as they dance toward their uncertain futures.

Tales of hometown days-gone-by capture the imagination of both the newcomer and citizen-of-roots. Presentations of history are well-organized, creatively-illustrated and institutionalized — the interpretation based more upon accurate record than remembered experience.

Yet the historical researchers have a recognized debt to their predecessors, those who have graded the road of known information through their attention to both significant events and incidental details. And often there is a soft touch of envy for the known masters who could combine a study of history with skillful writing style, homespun stories and scenes of their own past.

Vincent T. Leonard is such a master.

For a period of more than five years, he wrote a weekly historical column for the Green Sheet while he served as president of the Midcounty Historical Society. His stories reflected his background as both teacher and descendant of a pioneer Aptos family. His writings had their greatest appeal, however, because they illustrated his love for the place he had called home in the earliest years of his life.

For example, Leonard once created a graphic picture of how it felt as a child on an Aptos farm to arise on a frosty midwinter morning.

"When I drew the bedroom curtains this morning to confront the cold world white with frost, I drew back with a feeling of reluctance akin to fear," he wrote.

"Then I smiled to myself as I turned luxuriously in the warm flow from the wall furnace. For my first view of white roofs and grassy slopes had carried me back 60 years to our old farmyard east of Aptos. My first reactions had been, 'I don't want to break the ice on the stock's watering trough and skim it off. I don't want to go over the frozen ridges of mud in the barnyard and feel all their cold, sharp edges through my rubber boots. I don't want to milk all those cows with my fingers so cold that they feel brittle. I don't want to break off those ice-covered leaves of kale for the rabbits!' It was then I realized where I was — and when — and smiled to myself as I settled back into the pampered comfort of my declining years."

Born in 1903, Leonard spent all of his childhood years near Aptos Village. He went to Aptos School and caught the daily train to Watsonville during high school. He then left in 1921 to attend the University of California at Berkeley, and did not return until after his retirement from teaching in 1964.

It was then his interest was sparked in the history of Aptos, and he soon became active with the Midcounty Historical Society which held monthly luncheons and historical programs at the Bay View Hotel. Many of those who attended and spoke at these meetings were friends who had known one another since childhood — each a descendant of a pioneering family.

The story of Vincent Leonard's family and how they came to settle in Aptos is a tale of adventure and hardship in the era of early California statehood and the Gold Rush.



VINCENT T. LEONARD
Pioneer descendant

Vincent Leonard's great-grandfather was a man named James Dignan, who escaped from Ireland with a price on his head after he knocked four English soldiers unconscious in a fight. Because he didn't know how badly he might have harmed these men, Vincent said, his great-grandfather had taken flight under the maiden name of his mother, and thereafter called himself James Leonard.

He made his way to Canada, where he began a family of three daughters. After his wife died, James obtained literature that advertised free land in Missouri and Nebraska. He moved there and later married a woman named Mary McCaulley of Ireland. Their children, all boys, were raised in the midwest and all but one decided to join their father in a family wagon train west.

"All the boys were married and each of the six families had their own wagon," Leonard said. "They also left with extra stock — cows and horses — but by the time they reached California there was only one ox pulling an old wagon cart."

After he arrived in Santa Cruz County, James obtained some land four-miles south of Aptos on the San Andreas Rancho of Jose Castro, and worked this land as a cattle ranch in continuation of the California tradition. When the Santa Cruz-Watsonville Railroad was built in the mid-1870s, the stop at "Leonard," marked the property inherited by Vincent's Great Uncle Tom.

Vincent Leonard's grandfather, also named James Leonard, took a job as carpenter in Soquel for pay of 50 cents per day — and he is listed among the first voters after the Soquel Township was formed in 1852. Several years later, his carpenter's skill was hired by Aptos Rancho owner Rafael Castro for construction of the Aptos wharf built in 1859 on the beach now called Rio del Mar.

The grandfather had saved money in the following decade toward the goal of his own business, and he was among the first to settle in the territory of Aptos Village once the bridges were built. His grocery was established near the corner of Trout Gulch Road, but it was soon destroyed by a fire that left the family gathering its resources to rebuild at another site.

When the Leonard store was reconstructed, the only land available belonged to the owner of the Live Oak House, Patrick Walsh, the uncle of Vincent's mother. The second grocery was built on stilts as something of a temporary structure, Vincent recalls, although it still stands today.

The Live Oak House stood in the village on the site where the Terrible Herbst Station is now located. The hotel was torn down in the mid-1960s, and Leonard said he is unsure of its exact age.

"But I do know that my mother (Clara Walsh Leonard) had seen the workers put the finishing touches on the Bay View Hotel from her room at the Live Oak House," he said.

Both his mother and father were raised in Aptos and had attended the first tiny Aptos School that stood near the present site of County Bank and Rancho del Mar Shopping Center.

Vincent's father, Thomas Leonard, was born during the family's journey West, somewhere near Lincoln, Nebraska. He grew up during the era of the early lumbering industry in the hills, a time that was still somewhat unsettled for the Aptos community. He once told his son, Vincent, that he recalled the days when people had been troubled by grizzly bears and mountain lions, for instance.

Thomas Leonard had worked in the family's first store, but after it burned he moved to Butte County, where he planted 1,000 acres of wheat.

"It was a good growing season and the wheat was ready to cut," Leonard said. "Then there was a terrible rain and a heavy flood. My father walked out in the morning and saw all the wheat under water, and then just got on his bicycle and rode away."

He rode about 100 miles before he stopped to tell someone what had happened.

"The man told him to go back," Leonard said. "He said you don't get a real good crop unless there is a flood like that. So he did go back, and sure enough, the crop dried out and my father made enough money to rebuild the Aptos store."

Leonard's grandfather had also raised money for the grocery store through a small mining venture near La Selva Beach. The family worked the blacksand gold mine by shoveling the sand onto a slough lined with carpeting. The gold remained when the sand was washed away.

Thomas Leonard raised his family in a home that had been among those included in "Illustrations of Santa Cruz County," published by W.W. Elliott in 1879. This was the property of early mill owner Ned Nichols, and the home stood at the present site of Loma Linda Lodge just east of the village. The property extended across Soquel Drive and included the Aptos Mineral Spring, where the water was known for its health-giving powers. The family lands also included an orchard that is now the grounds of Valencia School.

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