

Finding family history with local ties



CAROLYN SWIFT
Flashbacks

Some descendants of local pioneers — their family names attached to roads, gulches, colleges, libraries, museums and other sites throughout the county — are looking at their lineage with renewed awareness and a deeper appreciation, thanks to the History Forum, a support group of the Museum of Art and History.

Offspring of the Sesnons, Porters,

McPhersons, Spreckels and Mangels discovered that while staying tied to personal ancestry requires some effort, it is even more difficult to understand the threads of continuity that secure it to a larger picture of the West.

Even though only a handful of the 75-member circle has an ancestry with regional ties, forum members credit organization founder Jim Dolkas, who died in April 2001, for inspiring them with his keen curiosity about the past.

Born in 1931 to parents who had emigrated from Greece to Brooklyn, Dolkas had a lifetime fondness for American history. The hardships, triumphs and twists of fate that characterized pioneer life, the mix of

cultures and languages that sought a foothold in the new society, and the climate of adventure and expanded opportunity in California intrigued him. When he learned about the ancestry of his wife, the former Susan Sesnon, Dolkas was absorbed by the story of her family and the role it played in the development of California.

Susan Dolkas and her sister, Nell Cliff, both History Forum members, recall summer vacations as children when they stayed at Pino Alto (High Pine), the summer estate built in 1911 by

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Sesnon Collection

The Sesnon family relaxes at the rear of their summer home in 1914. Today, the mansion is the Sesnon House at Cabrillo College.

Flashbacks

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their grandparents, William T. and Mary Sesnon. Today the home is a part of Cabrillo College. Initially, the mansion sat next to the 1872 ranch house of Mary's parents, Benjamin and Kate Porter. The surrounding lands were empty fields, and the house had a view of the ocean.

Ben, along with cousin George, a Forty-Niner, had acquired a nearby tannery in 1853. The two had come to Soquel along with George's brother, John T., who became Santa Cruz County sheriff in 1857. John T. later influenced the economic and cultural development of the Pajaro Valley by arranging for the Chinese community of Watsonville to move across the Pajaro River in 1888 to a new site called Brooklyn, roughly 50 yards north of the Porter home.

Another brother, Frank, supervised the Soquel tannery and a related shoe manufacturing business in San Francisco. Ben's brother, Edward "Ned," founded Soquel's first store.

Ambitions of the Porter brothers and cousins were realized. Eventually, Ben paid taxes in 12 counties. George served a term in the state Senate. Together, they invested in the lands of Mission San Fernando, where George moved to run a San Fernando Valley ranch.

Through the MAH History Forum, Susan and Nell grew closer to relatives they had rarely seen in prior years. Diane Porter Cooley is the great-granddaughter of John T. and the granddaughter of Warren R. Porter, who served as state lieutenant governor. Another History Forum member, Estelle Allegrini is George Porter's granddaughter.

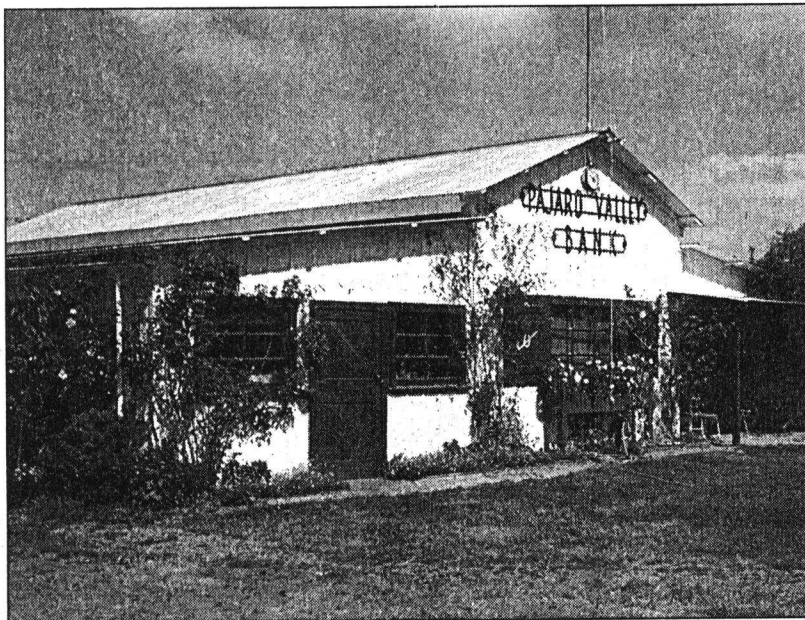
George and Ben Porter's close friendship was one of the topics Dolkas researched and wrote about as he probed the family archives. Sue Dolkas said her husband became the family chronicler and made it his mission to see that Sesnon family papers made their way to the archives at UCSC.

"I guess if you live with the history, it's just kind of there," she said. "But Jim knew this was important, that family history was connected and interwoven with California history."

Diane Cooley and Jim Dolkas became fast friends, sharing a passion for maintaining history and passing it on.

"Jim, who was not born to this, saw the regional approach as a fascinating topic to pursue," Cooley said. "The rest of us were just floating along with the tide. We were not so enthusiastic. He brought excitement for the investigation, for looking at parallels and relationships."

Earlier this month, Cooley finalized donation of the 335-acre Las Lomas Ranch to the Elkhorn Slough Foundation. In the days when John



Contributed photo

Because of John T. Porter's involvement with the Pajaro Valley Bank, grandson Tom saved the lettering and installed it on one of his barns at Las Lomas Ranch near Pajaro.

T. and Fanny Porter were raising their family in the large Porter-Vallejo mansion, a house that dates to the days of the San Cayetano Rancho and ownership by the Vallejo family, the Las Lomas property was the Porter "milk ranch." During the Depression, it became home to Diane's parents, Tom and Bernice Porter, and it was their wish to preserve the land and its heritage.

While the Porters have vigorously helped preserve the environment and history in the Monterey Bay region, Cooley will quickly squelch the notion that her family's work is something rare. In the Pajaro Valley alone, she said, there are dozens — the Sillimans, Traftons, Martinellis, Kellys, Solaris, Driscolls, Reiters and Riders, for starters, who are longtime supporters.

"They are like veins running through history that keep pumping life into the community through many generations of work and contribution to civic good, through all realms, teaching and serving on boards — it's a tradition of public service and love of the Pajaro Valley, a sense that we all benefit from living here," she said.

Her ancestors, Cooley asserts, were no more faultless than other settlers of the Gold Rush era.

"The ones who came in 1849 did not make it by being sweet and merciful," she said. "They had to be tough, sharp and hardworking."

Among current members of the History Forum is one who Cooley credits with "great, far-reaching generosity," from distant redwood groves to the Pajaro Valley Historical Association.

Lillian McPherson Rouse, descendant of Sentinel editor Duncan McPherson, made significant gifts along with family members toward completion of the 20,000 square-foot McPherson Center, which opened in

1993.

Born and raised in Santa Cruz, Rouse said she has never really left it, and remains loyal to both her hometown and Watsonville, where she has lived for many years.

She remembers talking about the history of Santa Cruz with her grandfather, Duncan McPherson, who directed publication of the Santa Cruz Sentinel off and on beginning 1864. He had crossed the plains to California with his family as a boy in 1852 and arrived in Santa Cruz four years later. After a few years in school, McPherson saved money as an ox-team driver until he had enough to make his first investment in the newspaper business.

Although she valued stories of early days that were told by her grandfather and parents, Rouse developed her interest in the preservation of history on her own.

"I was born interested in history and still have a lot to give to it," she said.

Karl Mertz, a longtime friend who helped set up the forum's James Dolkas Memorial Award, is the great-grandson of Claus Mangels, who had a ranch that still bears his name above Aptos. Mangels and his brother-in-law, Claus Spreckels, were business partners who made their agreements by handshake.

Spreckels, known as the "Sugar King," introduced the beet industry to the local community and built a sugar refinery in Watsonville, later moving south with a new refinery in the town of Spreckels, named after him. Spreckels owned a summer home in Aptos, a twin of the Mangels home, as well as the Aptos Hotel and resort in what is now Rio del Mar.

"Mangels was the silent partner who put a lot of the effort into making sure everything worked," said Mertz. "The Aptos Hotel would have been successful except for the Loma

Researchers can apply for grant

By CAROLYN SWIFT
SPECIAL TO THE SENTINEL

History researchers who have been gathering up details for a project of local or regional scope — a paper, book, video, oral history, or an architectural study — can apply for a \$1,000 grant from the James Dolkas Memorial Fund at the Museum of Art and History.

The grant is available through an endowment fund established with the Santa Cruz Community Foundation and supported by contributions from the Sesnon Foundation and History Forum members. The purpose of the memorial endowment is to award the grant annually to an applicant who then researches and produces a written document or museum quality display. The History Forum executive committee will select the award winner or winners.

Applications and information is available at the Museum of Art and History at the McPherson Center, 705 Front St., Santa Cruz. Candidates must prepare a narrative of 500 words or less, detailing the proposal and its goals. No requests can be accepted for work already completed; all submissions must be for work to be done and materials acquired after the project is reviewed.

The application deadline is Sept. 25. The award presentation will be made at the History Forum's annual holiday party at the Santa Cruz Yacht Club on Nov. 20.

Prieta Lumber Co. The story I got was that loggers raised hell in Aptos on Saturday nights. The people at the hotel didn't like it. Things like that didn't happen at the Del Monte in Monterey."

Mangels died in 1884 at age 59, just as his Aptos home was completed.

As a youth, Mertz spent many summers visiting his great aunt in the old home. Eventually, it became his summer retreat and then home for 20 years.

When MAH opened, Mertz and a cousin donated the Mangels Room as the community boardroom. He says his next project will be to get a sign up in Aptos to mark the site the old Castro Wharf, which once extended out to sea from the end of Aptos Wharf Road. Spreckels and Mangels bought and lengthened it to 1,000 feet, and — because of the Sugar King's connections to Hawaii — for a time it operated as an international seaport.

Trading stories and speculations about history, in the midst of social companionship, is the enjoyment of the History Forum as it raises money for MAH. Through the James Dolkas Memorial Fund, the group is offering local researchers financial help as they bring the historical picture of Monterey Bay into sharper focus.