

Skyland and Highland

By John V. Young

An attempt to find a name signifying a place higher than high accounts for the present name of Skyland, an isolated community well up on the crest of the Santa Cruz Mountains, off Soquel Road in the Highland district.

Highland Hill was the original center of things here, the home of a man named Dodge, who in 1867 leased a tract of land from Lyman J. Burrell to establish a vineyard and winery. Later, as families moved into the district to join in the growing wine-grape industry that spread through the hills in the late 1860s and 1870s, a colony adjoining Highland Center, as it came to be known, was labeled Skyland, although the two places are virtually identical.

Booming with the rest of the region, the town benefited principally from grape-and fruit-raising, and to a lesser extent from the lumber industry which went on around it in the canyons below. But as it benefited, so it suffered. The close of the lumber mills on the Soquel, Amaya, and Laurel Creeks as the big timber was cut off, the coming of the automobile that doomed the summer resort trade of railroad and stagecoach days, and the competition from the Valley with the mountain fruit crops all took their toll from Skyland, along with many another mountain town.

Phylloxera, the dreaded grape disease from France, wiped out large acreage in 1906 and 1907, just after the great earthquake had played such havoc with much of the region which lies directly over the San Andreas fault line. Erosion on the steep hillside ranches, where forest cover had been removed for planting, had set in after forty years of cultivation and was stripping the upper ridges of topsoil and filling the lower lands with its spoil. Springs were sealed over and many creeks had stopped running.

With nothing much left but a surprisingly mild climate and an unsurpassed view to offer in competition with more accessible towns, Skyland began to fade early in this century, although the advent of good roads aided somewhat in its tenuous grasp on departed glories of the 1880's and 1890's.

Travelers, residents, and visitors alike found ready ingress and egress down the ridge to Hall's bridge and Soquel Road, over the hill to Redwood Lodge and Hester Creek, or down less-traveled routes into Asbury Gulch and across to Highland Way.

Here it was that Don Beadel, Pacific coast shipping magnate, came to purchase a large tract of land from F.A. Hihn and to establish The Willows ranch, above the site of the old McEwen-Adams lumber mill of the 1880s.

The Willows

Beadel's son, Alec, one of the three brothers who operated the Beadel Brothers shipping concern, started in about 1904 to build up the estate to a stage of affluence which makes it even today (1934) one of the showplaces of the entire mountain region.

Al Beadel married the daughter of a Mrs. Hold, who had acquired the land from Don Beadel, and brought the property back into the family. Cottages and a beautiful rambling central home on the style of English farm houses sprinkled the landscape, crowned with what was said to be the largest privately owned indoor swimming pool in the United States. Under a huge canopy of glass, the great double pool of concrete and tile brought the curious from miles around and occupied columns of space in Eastern newspapers of the period.

Exotic garden plants from all quarters of the globe were planted in profusion; grassy terraces, fountains, and rock gardens transformed the forest into a paradise. Acquired recently by a Fresno rancher, J.B. Enloe, the estate is now (1934) being renovated for eventual opening as a resort.

Skyland Notables

Skyland post office ceased to exist in 1910 after rural free delivery came to the mountains at the end of a long, hard fight by the ranchers of the region for the service. The post office then had been in operation over two different periods: 1884 to 1886, and 1893 to 1910.

In 1887 the pious people of the community erected a church, planting in the front yard a separate bell tower under a spreading oak tree. (Author's note: The church is still in use today making it probably the oldest church in continuous use in the Santa Cruz Mountains.)

Skyland was also the home for nearly twenty years of Joseph James Bamber, one of the region's more colorful characters, whose death was marked by an obscurity no less remarkable than his career.

An "unidentified itinerant" knocked down by a car near the county alms house where he spent his last days brought only the briefest of notices in the newspapers at the time, March 19, 1930, when Bamber died in the county hospital from a fractured skull. He was later identified as Joseph J. Bamber of Los Gatos, a former newspaperman, and that was that. Bamber had been the publisher of an unusual newspaper, called *The Mountain Realty*, which enjoyed a more or less continuous existence at Skyland for two decades, from 1901 until 1922 when it was absorbed by Hi Baggerly's *Los Gatos Mail-News*. Under a Skyland dateline, the paper was devoted to mountain news and real estate notes, circulating throughout the central Santa Cruz Mountains. At first, it was printed by the Santa Cruz *Sentinel*, later in Los Gatos. Advancing years finally forced Bamber to give up the paper.

Born in Illinois, Bamber had come to the West Coast as a young man and settled in the Bay region, where he engaged in a wide variety of enterprises.

An original cover in the philatelic collection of E. E. Place of Los Gatos bears the heading "Bamber & McLeod Express," a pony service running from Oakland to Centerville. Bamber at one time amassed a considerable fortune in the business, but lost it later.

The *Pacific Coast Business Directory* of 1872 lists the American House at Centerville, operated by Bamber, as one of the principal hostelries of Alameda County. In 1872 Bamber married Miss Virginia Hill of Oakland, said to be the first white child born in Oakland (in 1853). She died in 1917. The couple operated a laundry in Alameda for a time, then the famous old Newport baths near Neptune Beach, also in Alameda, then moved to the mountains in 1893, settling about where Holy City now stands. In 1895 the family moved to Skyland where they ran a small hotel, a ranch or two, and finally the newspaper which was Bamber's last enterprise.

Skyland in the early 1930s was also the home of James B. King, a pioneer of the 1880s with a lively sense of humor and a keen recollection of days gone by.

King was prouder of his one-time title of "Champion plowman of the world," than he would have been of Jack Dempsey's fame, he said. (King had won the championship plowman's title in an international competition in Chicago in 1880. He had previously won third place twice.) Indeed, Dempsey was a frequent visitor to the region, King declared. At

one time, according to King, Dempsey was thinking of buying the Willows, but gave up the idea after his car got stuck in the mud several times in one winter.

One of his liveliest recollections was of an ill-fated trip to the Klondike in 1898. Following the story of an old prospector about a claim where all they had to do was to shovel out the gold, King and a group of friends bought an old tub on the San Francisco Bay mudflats, for \$1500, and somehow managed to get it to Resurrection Bay in Alaska.

Of the party, only four were experienced sailors, although all signed on as able-bodied seamen in order to obtain clearance under a Captain Edwards. Besides King, the party included M. R. Morse of San Jose; Julius Josefatz and Clayton Jones of Skyland; John Rankan, Wayne Rudey and F. LaSalle of Soquel; Bill Peakes, Bob Baxter, Bob Anderson, Albert Wright, A. G. Imlay, Chauncey Lease, and A. W. Bryant.

The party spent eight months looking in vain for gold. The old prospector who was to lead them to the lode had inconsiderately died the day before the party left San Francisco. However, it was not all loss. On their return, they leased the boat to some missionaries for a year, and then sold it for \$3000 just before it went to pieces on the beach.

Skyland was a residential section of note in the 1880s and 1890s, numbering among its well-known residents Charles H. Allen, principal at San Jose State Normal School, and Professor Norton of the same school.

While several fine homes are still to be found in the community, the principal attraction at the present (1934) is the New Jerusalem colony of Mr. Ernest Benninghoven, a religious cult which has struggled along for the last fifteen or twenty years with a handful of converts. Its center is the "Mt. Sinai Shrine," a memorial to the memory of Benninghoven, who departed this earth a few years ago.

The Hihn Empire

The story of Skyland would not be complete without the story of the man who owned most the forests around the town and provided it with much of its livelihood, who paid at one time a reputed one-tenth of all the taxes in the county—Frederick A. Hihn.

Born in Germany in 1829, he landed in Santa Cruz with a pack on his back in 1851, after a series of business ventures and a mining attempt or two. In his pack were all his earthly possessions, plus some trinkets to sell as a roaming peddler. According to Herbert Martin of Glenwood, who recalled his father's stories about Hihn and his pack, Hihn set up business in a crude store constructed of packing boxes. Between tending his store and making long trading forays into the mountains, he was a busy man.

How he managed to acquire an enormous fortune in real estate, including thousands of acres of prime redwood timber, is one of the legends of the county. Among his holdings was a mill site at Laurel, where the Hihn company operated in 1892 with his sons, Louis W., August C., and Fred O. Hihn, and son-in-law, W. T. Cope.

Hotels, railroads, concessions, forests, mills, manufacturing plants and shipping lines—there was little in the line of business in Santa Cruz County that the Hihn company did not own or was actively involved in during this period. One Santa Cruz County history published in 1892 credits him with founding Capitola, along with a couple of banks.

The upper portion of his holdings in Soquel canyon, bordering on Skyland and Spanish Ranch, is still known as the Hihn forest.

Sources

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