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Old Santa Cruz By Ernest Otto

Bishop William Taylor, a religious leader in California pioneer days, in a book of which he was the author, gave an interesting account of a visit to the Methodist class in Santa Cruz which means it must have been about 1849 as this class, about the first formed in California, became a church in 1850.

In the account of the visit he described the farming land which was the bottom land surrounded by the lower range of hills of the city. To him it was a fertile valley and a large acreage then was given over to the cultivation of potatoes.

Even in the seventies that section had many who still tilled the soil in that section and there were farms of good size.

Those who remember the farms of those days, especially those in the Mission Hill section or wherever much land was under cultivation, will never forget the tank houses and windmills, used for pumping water for domestic and irrigation purposes. Along the river bottom at the banks of the San Lorenzo and in sections where the smaller streams passed through were water wheels, surrounded by cans which lifted the water on one side and emptied it on the other. The tall, square tank houses, larger at the bottom, were surmounted by the windmills which added a picture to the landscape while the motion of the wheels made music in the wind.

DREHER FARM

In the very center of the city was located quite a farm. It was the Dreher farm owned by a 49er, with the large residence in which a surviving daughter, Mrs. Louis Wessendorf, was born. The home still stands at Elm and Center streets. In those days Elm street ceased at Center street. There was a row of homes along Maple St. and then the Dreher farm started. It was bounded by Center and Washington streets and except for the part occupied by the E. L. Williams place it reached Lincoln St. It was typical of the farms of those days in that it had its orchard and raised its hay crop and other food-stuffs.

HIHN ESTABLISHMENT

While the F. A. Hihn place, the home of the capitalist, would not be considered a farm, yet over the flat here and there property along Chestnut avenue, Walnut avenue and Lincoln and Vine streets was farmed more or less by the Hihns. Like all the farms in those days these vacant lots had unpainted split picket fences with a railing along the top. These are now decidedly in style; then they were an indication that the property had not yet reached the residence stage.

The Hihn mansion then stood at the head of Church street. Most of the land was given to farming. Hihn had a wonderful orchard with about seven varieties of pears as well as apples and peaches, apricots, plums, cherries and prunes. He also raised a variety of berries. Before this became an artichoke center the Hihns always had a row of artichokes. There were always rows of rhubarb, and watermelon, muskmelon and cucumber vines and varied vegetables.

CIRCUS LOT WAS PASTURE

Where the Anna McSweeney residence and the First Baptist church now stand was an orchard of the Hihns with a variety of pippins, not a very tasty apple. The lads of the neighborhood used this lot considerably (and that included the writer) and had on it a race track.

With the exception of about three houses the orchards of the Hihns reached from Center street to Chestnut avenue.

BASEBALL DIAMOND

There was room enough near the corner of Center street for a small neighborhood baseball diamond for the boys. No one asked permission but never were they disturbed for using the many Hihn vacant lots.

At about where the Bianchi and Bias residences stand was quite a depression. After heavy rains the water would flow into it. Some winters this was a pond almost the entire season. The boys would make rafts and spear the bullfrogs, although they were not an edible variety.

Over half the block were many trees of apples. A variety called the rambos was a favorite with the boys, who gathered them and folks would come from various parts of the city and leave with sacks of apples for the winter. Some even gathered them and made cider. These were not used by the owners and most of them went to waste. At the corner where the Cope house stands the lot extended to Lincoln street. Another lot on Lincoln close by was owned by the Hihns which had a delicious red apple.

COOPER FARM

Even Pacific avenue had its farms. William Cooper was a merchant but he had enough property for a farm. The imposing old time residence erected in the fifties faced Front street. Across the street was one of the Cooper lots reaching to the river. On this lot was the barn for the horses and cow. The family home property reached from Front street to Pacific avenue. The fence along Front street was a sharp pointed picket fence and a high board fence was along Pacific avenue with a gateway leading to a path through the orchard to the home.

THE COOPER LOT

Wonderful cherry trees, tall and spreading, included the Royal Ann, the black Tartarian and other varieties. The walk to the home was bordered with lovely iris and Mrs. Cooper always looked after her flowers.

Across the street west of Pacific avenue was the Cooper lot, a long one facing the street, and here were always held the smaller circuses. For several years the Montgomery Queen circus appeared there, even when it traveled overland, and to this day old-timers look back to the one-ring circus, when they find it impossible to watch two and three rings all in operation at the same time. They always looked back to Mollie Brown as the most wonderful bareback rider they had ever seen. My sisters thought so as she came into the family garden and they gave her roses which she wore while performing. It was with this circus that George Hastings, the great band leader, orchestra leader, church pipe organ player and instructor of all instruments, first came to town. Then a Bloomington, Illinois, boy, he first saw Santa Cruz and of all the places along his travels he selected Santa Cruz for a residence.