

Thoughts on the “National Heritage Area” narrative
by Larry Ames, 6/19/16

At the May 31st inaugural meeting of the National Heritage Area (NHA) Task Force, we were asked to suggest the “topic” or “theme” of the County’s “narrative”.

Some of the ideas that were tossed out:

- the Native Americans and first European farmers of the region;
- the excellent collection of regional parks;
- and the suggestion from the public about “Agri-hoods”.

While these are interesting and important ideas, Santa Clara County is hardly unique in having a history before and after the arrival of European farmers; there are a number of areas across the country with wonderful parks (and ours, while great, are more “natural” than “historic”); and the Agri-hoods are more of a hope for the future than part of our heritage.

I submit that our County’s story should be about **“the transition from ‘The Valley of the Hearts Delight’ to ‘Silicon Valley’.”** Why did high-tech take root here? And why has it been so challenging for other areas that have tried to replicate our success? (And, as a useful follow-on: if we can identify some of the key high-tech enablers, perhaps we can help protect and enhance them for future benefit.)

[Note: I am an engineer by trade, and I came to the valley 37 years ago for a career in high-tech.]

I can see us telling a story comprised of various threads and how they’re woven together. (I don’t know all the threads or connections, and probably don’t have all the details here correct: that’s what the upcoming research would be for!)

- Our great climate early on lead to Native American farming
- Climate → agriculture → arriving Europeans settle here to grow provisions for Monterey & San Francisco: San José is the first civilian town in Calif.
- Native Americans decorate with cinnabar → Europeans find mercury ore at New Almaden → richest mine in California → enabled gold mining. Mercury also a component of percussion caps, a key technology in the Civil War. The rich mines → local wealth, trade, the construction of a train line to SF and the use of the port of Alviso for trade & international commerce
- Farming opportunities, need for labor → waves of immigrants → blending of cultures & various skill-sets; interest in education → local colleges (some of the first on the West Coast): educated population who were willing to travel, explore, experiment: area is predisposed to be inventive.
- Agriculture → Valley of Hearts Delight: prunes & apricots → drying & canning → need for processing equipment → machine shops & technical skills. Ice plant on RR line → shipping fresh food across country → expands local agriculture. Agricultural machines → Food Machinery Corporation → FMC → built tanks for WW II → industrialization of the valley
- Farmers experimented with crops & agricultural techniques. Andrew Hill; James Lick; others → gifts to the community: Lick Observatory → high tech
- also: canneries → need for oversized sewage treatment plant → area had infrastructure in place for explosive growth of high tech
- WW II and Cold War: gov’t push for high tech.
- Universities; educated population w/ an experimental mindset; machine shops; commercial connections; wealth; great climate; wonderful parks to entice high-tech workers:
all of the above → Silicon Valley

While we are telling the story, we will also want to have some tangible “touchstones” for visitors:

- Almaden Quicksilver Park (AQS): old mercury mines & smelters; Casa Grande
- The first park: Alum Rock, and their mineral baths. (Also, the ghost town of Drawbridge.)
- Early structures (e.g., Peralta and Sunol adobes); 1800’s farmhouses; honor (and help protect?) historic districts (e.g., Naglee Park, Willow Glen) & cultural districts (Japantown, Little Portugal)
- History Museum at Kelley Park: replica of electric light tower; remnants of an old orchard
- Lick Observatory on Mt. Hamilton
- Alviso, an early port that once supported international trade
- Railroads: Willow Glen Trestle; Coyote Crk Trestle on Three Creeks Trail; Del Monte water tower
- Moffett Field: “Hanger One”, built for WW II airships
- Mt. Umunhum radar tower & the first big computer (SAGE); Computer Museum in Mt. View.
- Maybe some of the early tilt-up high-tech buildings, the first Apple building (in Cupertino), an early IBM building (too bad we’ve lost Bldg 25, site of the first disk drive!); and the new Apple “spaceship” campus.

And there are probably many more that we can think of. The NHA brochures we will develop could list the key locations, and we could have visitor centers (and maybe tours) for some of them.

~Larry Ames

BTW:

I’ve always liked the mural that once was in the old SJC Airport Terminal C: it illustrated the tapestry of history in the Valley. I feel our goal on the NHA Taskforce is to try to recreate something like this, but as a narrative and actual artifacts scattered across the valley.

