

SAN RAFAEL SUMMERS

Our family used to tease me about an incident that occurred in San Rafael when I was three or four years old. I do not remember it myself but I heard the story so often that I am sure it must be true. One day, when I was playing in the garden, I saw a snake, a green snake with brown bands or rings round its body. I ran into the house shouting that I had seen either a rattlesnake or a ringworm, I wasn't sure which.

Then there was the famous Fourth of July, a year or two before I was born, when my cousin Arthur Lilienthal ate the fireworks. They were small cone-shaped objects which, when ignited, erupted violently into repulsive squirming wormlike forms, but in their tin-foil wrappings they looked like candy, very tempting to a small boy. They must have tasted perfectly awful. A large dose of a powerful emetic prevented any permanent ill effects.

Some years before that - more than ninety years ago - Ben Lilienthal, the oldest grandchild of Louis and Sarah Sloss, ate a handful of seeds from a castor-oil bush on the Sloss property. That experiment had deplorable results which were also cured by an emetic. But you must remember that digestive crises of this kind were few and far between. I don't want to give you the impression that a child's life in San Rafael was just one emetic after another.

In fact the summers here were generally placid, perhaps even a little monotonous. On weekdays the Gerstle and Sloss places were inhabited almost exclusively by women and children. Every morning the men of the Gerstle family, after an early breakfast, were driven by the coachman, Fred Wright, in a two-horse station wagon or "carryall" to the main station to catch the 7:40 train and ferry to San Francisco. The Sloss businessmen made the same daily pilgrimage in their own carryall, driven by John Hughes. There were two routes to the city: one via Tiburon, always referred to as the "broad gauge" line, and the "narrow gauge" (which was later electrified) by way of Sausalito. Either way, the combined train and ferry trip took about an hour. The men returned from their city offices by the 5:10 ferry, were met at the San Rafael "depot" by the carryall, and were home by half past six. The summers in San Rafael lasted a good deal longer than the public school vacations, so for several weeks the children of school age also commuted by the 7:40 train, though they came back to San Rafael earlier than the adults. The horses could not be overworked, so the kids walked home from one of the intermediate "narrow gauge" stations in San Rafael, West End or B Street - a ten-minute stroll, certainly no hardship for healthy youngsters. Of course all this happened years and years before the Golden Gate Bridge was built or even thought of.

For the women of the family the most important event of the day was the morning expedition to the "village", as downtown San Rafael was always called, to buy food. Hannah Gerstle and at least one or two of her daughters did the shopping, sometimes on foot but more often in a carriage. There was no such thing as a supermarket in those days, so the marketing involved stops at half a dozen small stores strung along three or four blocks on Fourth Street: the butcher, the fishmonger, the baker, the grocer, the shop for fresh fruit and vegetables; for although both Gerstle and Sloss perperties were provided with orchards and kitchen gardens, there were so many people to be fed that additional supplies were almost always required.

A great deal of food was consumed in San Rafael. Meals were frequent and lavish. (Nobody had ever heard of calories or cholesterol; yet in spite of rich fare and sedentary habits, nobody got very fat.)

In the evenings there was often a game of cards, generally pinochle, and sometimes dominoes as well. But the men had to get up so early that they went to bed early too. In the Gerstle household, at precisely twenty minutes past nine somebody would always start to yawn, and the infection quickly spread to the entire group. The clockwork regularity of this obvious symptom of fatigue became a family joke that soon turned into a tradition. By ten o'clock almost everyone had retired.

My father, Adolph Mack (always called Dick), was very fond of children, and the children adopted him as their favorite entertainer. During the eighteen-nineties, on twilight summer evenings right after dinner, the youngsters of both Gerstle and Sloss families would frequently gather on the front steps of the Gerstle house to listen to Dick's stories about two juvenile characters he invented, Frankie and Louise. Their adventures were always exciting, involving hairbreadth escapes from ferocious lions and tigers, pursuits by bloodthirsty Indians or pirates, excursions to the moon or under the sea. Many of these tales were freely adapted from the works of Jules Verne and other writers of what we now call science fiction, but Dick's young audiences did not demand unqualified originality; they loved the stories and always clamored for more.

On Sundays, when most of the other men of the Gerstle and Sloss families played tennis, Dick would often organize all-day expeditions, complete with picnic lunches, for the children. Bicycles were just beginning to be popular, and many of these trips were made on bicycles of assorted sizes by way of dusty roads to Fairfax, Kentfield, or Larkspur. On other Sundays Dick would take half a dozen children by train to Tiburon to fish for shiners, or more rarely for a strenuous climb to the top of Mount Tamalpais. On one memorable occasion he escorted them through a railroad tunnel near Corte Madera; a train overtook them and they all barely escaped death by flattening themselves against the tunnel walls. That adventure earned Dick a vigorous scolding from a number of irate parents.

The peaceful routine of San Rafael was interrupted at long intervals by a few glamorous weddings. The first of these was the marriage of Alice Gerstle to Jake Levison at the end of July 1896. The ceremony took place in what was called the "pavilion" located in a clearing in the redwood grove. The pavilion was a many-sided structure with a wooden floor, a pyramidal roof, and open sides screened with wire mesh to keep out the mosquitoes, which were an irritating nuisance for many years until all of the swamps and marshes in that part of Marin County were either drained or sprayed with oil. A great many guests from San Francisco were invited to Alice's wedding, and the light summer dresses of the women made a colorful contrast to the formal frock coats of the men. I have been told that I was allowed to watch this wedding, but as I was only two years old I must confess that I do not remember it at all.

I do remember very clearly the next wedding at Violet Terrace, that of the youngest Gerstle daughter, Bella, to Mortimer Fleishhacker on October 12th, 1904. Again the ceremony, attended by several hundred guests, took place in the pavilion. It was followed by an elaborate breakfast on the tennis court, which had been equipped with a temporary wooden floor and covered by a huge canvas tent. The wet season had already started, and for several days before the wedding the rain fell steadily, so the horse-drawn wagons carrying food and equipment from the San Francisco caterer got stuck in the deep mud of the unpaved roads of Marin County. Fortunately the rains stopped just in time; the day of the wedding was sunny and warm and the wagons did get through, so the occasion was a brilliant success.

Five years later another wedding was celebrated, this time on the front lawn of the Sloss property: the marriage of Louise Sloss, daughter of Leon and Bertha Sloss, to Lloyd Ackerman in June 1909. Several orange trees grew on the lawn, but at that season they bore no fruit. The bride's mother wanted the setting to look as festive and colorful as possible, so she bought a number of crates of oranges, and for a few days before the wedding the family teen-agers - Jack Lilienthal, the bride's brothers Louis and Leon, and I - spent many hours on ladders tying oranges onto the branches of the trees. The effect was quite spectacular and it was a very beautiful wedding.

East of the Sloss estate and separated from it by Grove Street, a short dead-end lane, was the property owned by Louisa Greenwald, widow of the purchasing agent of the Alaska Commercial Company. The Greenwald household comprised a small group of grown-ups, very quiet and sedate. When we visited Aunt Louisa and her family we were always received kindly, but we felt slightly subdued and took care to be on our best behavior. Facing Grove Street just below the big house was a small white cottage occupied, after 1900, by the youngest Greenwald daughter, Alice, and her husband Louis Greene. The Greens had two children, Louis Jr. and Rosalie, but they were much younger than my contemporaries and formed part of a different set of juvenile playmates.

Both Lewis Gerstle and his brother-in-law Louis Sloss died in 1902, when I was eight years old, so I have only vague impressions of their presence in San Rafael. During nearly all of my childhood and adolescence my summer memories are dominated by the two widowed sisters, Sarah Sloss and Hannah Gerstle. They were truly devoted to each other and spent at least part of every day together. They did not always agree, but their differences of opinion never became acrimonious; their senses of humor were too lively to permit anything approaching a quarrel. There was no fence or hedge or barrier between the two estates, and in fact nobody knew precisely where the dividing line ran. There was a constant exchange of visits between the members of the two families, and the children played all over and paid no attention at all to property lines.

So my recollections are in general of a succession of peaceful, contented, rather uneventful summers. For almost fifty years Violet Terrace served from May to September or October as the home of four generations of the Gerstle family. Since 1930 it has been a public park, an area of rest and recreation for the citizens of San Rafael.

GERSTLE MACK

Gerstle Park, San Rafael
14 September 1975