

# Family's reunion breathes life into history

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If only all history lessons could be as engaging as the one that took place in Gerstle Park yesterday, Allison Woodside, 12, would have no trouble acing the subject in school.

"This is much more fun than your normal history class," she said. "This is about *my* family's past."

The San Jose seventh-grader was one of 200 guests who came to San Rafael from as far away as Alaska and Washington, D.C., for a family reunion that united five generations of Sloss and Gerstle family members, all descendants of pioneer stock.

Cameras flashed. Video cameras rolled. Addresses and anecdotes were exchanged. There was no shortage of tissues, or hugs.

Many, like Allison, spent part of the breezy afternoon trying to decipher the amazingly complex family tree that was spread out on a wooden picnic table for all to see.

"It's so confusing," said a befuddled Allison.

In a nutshell, the entire group that lunched on blue-and-white tablecloths in the park yesterday could be traced back to two adventurous German immigrants who sailed to America in the mid-19th century seeking freedom and fortune in California at the height of the Gold Rush.

Louis Sloss and Lewis Gerstle be-

## GENERA-TIONS:

Margaret Sloss, a 97-year-old San Franciscan, visits with her great-granddaughter Rachele Sloss of Juneau, Alaska (photo at right). Mort Fleishhacker (photo far right) exhorts family members to keep the family history and genealogy up to date.

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Marian Little Utley

came partners in a mercantile business in Sacramento. In the early 1850s Sloss went on a buying trip to Philadelphia and came back with more than what he bargained for: Sarah, his 19-year-old bride. The couple sang the praises of Sarah's sister, Hannah, to the still single Gerstle. Before long, Gerstle made a buying trip to Philadelphia himself. He, too, returned a married man and his trusted business partner became his brother-in-law. That was the beginning of what came to be known as the Sloss Gerstle clan, two very prestigious families in San Francisco and Marin.





After the Sacramento River had flooded them out one too many times, the two families moved to San Francisco, where their families established the Alaska Trading Co. The Slosses had six children, the Gerstles seven.

In 1881, the wealthy Gerstles purchased a sprawling secondary home in San Rafael. The house came to be known as Violet Terrace for the pansies and violets that blanketed the property.

The Sloss family acquired the second home on the property, later known as the Levison home.

The homes became the summer vacation spot for descendants of both families until about 1930, when Hannah Gerstle, the glue that held the family together, passed away in her 90s and the Gerstle home was bequeathed to the city by her children. The house, where people swear there had never been fewer than 18 people at the dinner table, was later razed by city officials because it was too expensive to maintain. The Levison home, which had been sold to private developers, was also destroyed.

Most of the talk at yesterday's reunion centered on the lazy summer

days the Gerstle and Sloss children, grandchildren and great grandchildren spent on the property now open to the public as Gerstle Park.

One by one, the elders in the group, those who had the privilege to live on the Gerstle property for extended periods of time, took the microphone and indulged in some — sometimes rambling — reminiscing.

Many of the more wrinkled members in attendance knew the stories and nodded knowingly. Many others were hearing the stories for the first time.

Ted Lilienthal, one of Hannah Gerstle's great-grandchildren who

lived on the property for the first 18 years of his life, talked about riding Beauty, a plump pony, bareback into downtown San Rafael. Mere mention of Beauty drew nostalgic sighs from the "60-years-and-up" table.

Lilienthal, one of the organizers of yesterday's reunion — the fourth since 1957 — had purposely separated the picnic tables by age group so that same-age descendants from all over the country could meet, bond and, perhaps, agree to carry on the historic torch — and the reunion tradition.

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## Family

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Nearly everyone who spoke paid homage to Cesar Bettini, the Italian groundskeeper and animal caretaker who managed the Gerstle property for \$90 a month.

"He was a stand-in father for us kids," said Lilienthal. "He called me Tito and he explained to me the facts of life."

Bettini lived on a house on the property with his five children, including Paul Bettini, former mayor of San Rafael. That house was also later razed by the city, which eventually replaced it with a children's play area.

The younger Bettini said his fa-

ther "didn't know one end of the cow from the other" when he took the cow-tending job. He remembered fondly how well his family had been treated by their father's employers.

"The Gerstles would have us over for dinner at Christmas. Now what wealthy family would invite their servants over for their Christmas meal?" asked Bettini, his eyes watering.

Bettini said his wife had told him not to attend yesterday's reunion because he had become so choked up at the last one in 1986.

"Our parents spoke of Violet Terrace as though it were a magical place," said Ruth Levison, who introduced herself as Alice Gerstle Levison's oldest granddaughter.

Levison, who was quietly remem-

bering with Edith Lilienthal Dorfman away from the crowd, said she regretted having spent only two summers on the property, in 1927 and 1928.

She recalled how her father had been scolded for eating cherries from what was thought to be a Sloss property tree.

Later, it was learned that the tree was actually on the Gerstle side and her father's reputation was redeemed.

"Do you remember that willow tree?" Dorfman asked her. "If you didn't want to see anybody, you could just hide under that tree and no one would find you."

Dorfman, of San Francisco, was one of Hannah and Lewis Gerstle's great-grandchildren.

"Everyone called Hannah 'Tiny' because she just kept shrinking," said Dorfman, who laughed about the time her father ate firecrackers wrapped in shiny foil thinking they were candy.

Similar conversations unraveled from table to table.

Wasn't he the cousin of Sarah's third brother?

Didn't he have a sister that married a Sloss?

Whatever happened to . . . ?

People scrutinized each other's nametags, which indicated from which original Sloss or Gerstle family member each guest descended and by how many generations.

No one seemed to mind divulging their age in bold numbers on their chest.