



the reactor

by Paul Azevedo

What is it you find boring? I talked the other day with a bright, intelligent Pacifica high school student who tells me she is bored stiff with her course in California history.

This same girl is an enthusiastic trekkie, and an authority on every TV show on the air now or recently. She could give you a brief biography on most current TV stars. She has many interests and hobbies and keeps constructively busy. But California history bores her.

That got under my skin. I find the history of my native state perhaps the most fascinating of any state in the union.

NO OTHER political subdivision has produced unabashed seekers after riches and power like Stanford, Crocker and Fair, or William Sharon, who was listed in San Francisco city directories as "capitalist."

The bizarre 19th century characters like Emperor Norton are a cliché. The miners who panned gold, the placer gullywashers who succeeded them, the early Indians, farmers and ranchers, each could be the subject of a full and fascinating history course.

I presume that if enough effort is made, any course in school can be made dull and lifeless. But California's history is not a dead thing. It vibrates with music. It throbs with the bright hopes of multitudes who came here from every part of the world.

RIGHT HERE in Pacifica 100 years ago, the census carried listings for hardworking Chinese farm crews and Italian immigrant farmers and Swiss milkers and Portuguese dairymen. Pioneer Pacifica farmers came here from Scotland, via Australia, a fantastic trip today, unimaginably grueling at that time.

The Italians and the French and the Portuguese came to the hills in Sonoma and Napa counties, and found it like home—except that here they found cheap land they could own to grow their grapes and make their wine.

ALL OVER the San Joaquin valley and the Sacramento valley and the smaller valleys of the coast ranges the Azorian Portuguese settled, and wherever they settled they worked, and bought land, and cows, and developed hands like hams from milking those cows day after day, year after year. Sometimes they started as young as six years old.

The Chinese came too. They built the railroads. Some lived in camps in the bay marshes and fished for shrimp and fish.

The Chileans came, and the Mexican miners from Sonora with skills in extracting gold that they passed on to the Americans and the Irish and to some Kanakas from Hawaii.

Hubert Howe Bancroft found our history so monumental he set up an entire publishing company and hired many writers to chronicle our history.

He was right to do so. It is a fantastic tale. It is too late now for the 15 year old to get much out of the short course she has been taking.

I hope she discovers—soon—the marvelous wealth of information that is lying ready, like gold nuggets in a stream bed, for her to find.

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