



Paul Azevedo

The Reactor

For Jane, In Australia

Usually this column is written for and to Pacificans. This is an exception. It's about Pacifica, but it's for Jane, a teen-ager in Australia who happens to be the penpal of my daughter, Joan.

I can't tell you all about Pacifica, Jané, in this short space, but I'll try.

Pacifica is a seacoast city, with more than five miles of ocean front, with dramatic rocky headlands and long sandy beaches. It's really a group of tiny finger valleys and marine terraces, divided up by steep hills which separate this city into a number of separate communities, each having its own character and flavor.

Almost 40,000 people live in about 13,000 homes, apartments and condominiums. Most of the breadwinners are commuters to jobs in San Francisco, the San Francisco International Airport, and other parts of the San Francisco Peninsula, including one place you may have heard of but which really does not exist on any map: Silicon Valley, which is just down the peninsula from here.

Pacifica has nine grade schools and two high schools. Our grade schools cover kindergarten through eighth grade, the high schools ninth through 12th grade. (I think you would call our grades "forms.")

Our grade schools were built in a hurry, to accommodate rapid expansion during the 1950s and 1960s, when our city was growing very rapidly, and our schools were overcrowded. Now enrollment is going down, and the undistinguished one-story, 20-to 30-year-old schools we have now will have to serve our needs for a long time to come.

Pacifica is a community of "average" people, neither much better off nor much worse off than the average American.

However, we live in one of California's wealthiest counties, San Mateo County, and only a few miles away there are towns full of people of great wealth, some of whom are famous as well.

San Francisco is just five miles from our northern border, and there you will find a city of contrasts.

In the same city you will find Gordon Getty, the richest man in the nation, and a downtown Market Street that can be scary to walk at night because of the kind of scruffy panhandlers, drunks and drug addicts who may accost you as you walk along.

Within a couple of blocks of Market Street are some of the world's fanciest shops, patronized by very wealthy and discriminating shoppers.

Pacifica, like Australia, traces its modern history to the 1770s. San Francisco Bay was discovered from Sweeney Ridge, now a part of Pacifica, in 1769.

Before that the area was populated by Ohlone Indians (our kind of aborigine) and many grizzly bears. The Spanish, then the Mexicans settled here; then came the Americans about 1850. The "americans" were actually Irish and Scots and Italians and Portuguese and quite a number of Australians, such as Robert Inches and the Comerfords, who brought us so many Eucalyptus that now they are the most common kind of tree in Pacifica's boundaries. The Italians and Portuguese raised artichokes, peas and brussels sprouts, but after World War II the crop switched to children as subdivisions replaced farms.

We still have deer and raccoons and bobcats in our hills, part of which are reserved for county and state parks. Pacifica is a beautiful place. I hope you'll be able to see it for yourself one day.