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New book offers pictorial journey of Moraga's history

By *Sophie Braccini*



Susan Skilton, author of "Images of America, Moraga" Photo provided

At a recent meeting of the California Conference of Historical Societies, four Moraga residents received awards for their service to the Moraga Historical Society, a local institution that will celebrate its 50th anniversary this year. Among them, genealogist Susan Skilton was recognized for her recent completion of a book about the history of Moraga commissioned by Arcadia Publishing to be part of its "Images of America" collection.

Arcadia states on its site, "Images of America is an ambitious collection of chronicles that accurately capture the essence of what gives each American small town, neighborhood, and downtown its unique flavor." Skilton set out to document this feel for Moraga's unique essence over a year ago through many pictures and text.

There are over 300 photographs in Skilton's 126-page book, which offers a good introduction to the history of this town that over 16,000 people call home. Skilton decided on the book's eight chapters and followed Arcadia's format that dictates the number of words and pictures per page.

The Moraga author has been a member of the MHS for almost 10 years, and this is where she started her research for the book, with the help of Elsie Mastick, the society's archivist. She says that, due to the publisher's format, she had to make choices and decided to focus on certain aspects while leaving others out. She is aware that some topics such as the churches, the schools, and the local sports were not given all the development it could have.

Skilton, however, did dedicate an entire chapter to the trains that once passed through Moraga - potentially one of the missed opportunities for the little town to ever become a vibrant economic center. The loss of the trains that connected Moraga to Oakland on one side all the way to Sacramento, the decision not to have the United Nations set its headquarters in Moraga - yes, that was a credible proposition made in 1945 - and more recently the disengagement of the Gateway freeway project linking Highway 24 to 680 through Moraga were all decisions that contributed to making Moraga an enclave town, for the pleasure of most of its residents.

The chapter on Saint Mary's College documents, among other aspects, the preflight school that was operated there by the Navy during World War II as well as Lake LaSalle that existed on what is now playing fields.

The book also highlights many of Moraga's founding people such as presidents of the Moraga Company that owned most of the town and started to create the first housing subdivisions, after Joaquin Moraga and his descendants sold their land grant in the late 19th century.

Even those who already know a lot about the town's history may be surprised by some interesting facts: that Campolindo's front field was a lake; that the first housing development was built in Valle Vista and was later demolished by the water company when it acquired that land (now the staging area on Canyon Road); that Reginald Tibbetts who was Moraga's postmaster established a listening post in Moraga to listen to Japanese news during World War II; that the Moraga Barn on Viader Drive was originally a hotel built in 1911; and that many of the names of streets in Moraga come from the early ranchers that raised cattle and pigs in town, such as the Sanders and the Carrs.

This is Skilton's first book, but she has also published a number of genealogy articles. The Moraga resident's first career was teaching German language and literature at Diablo Valley College. She started doing research about her own family history and developed a passion for the activity that combines research,

tenacity and creativity. She is now a registered genealogist and works for Ancestry.com's division that offers help for people who are having difficulties with research.

The book can be purchased at the Moraga Historical Society and online. Arcadia has also published an "Images" book about Lafayette by Mary McCosker and Mary Solon and a history of Saint Mary's College by Ronald Isetti. The MHS also sells "Moraga Pride," a book that traces history from the first overland expedition of Spanish colonists into Alta California to today.

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