

Reminisces of SSF and the Enterprise Journal

By Vincent Mager, Editor of the Enterprise Journal

For the first 66 years of my life, when I got up in the morning, if I wanted to, I could look out the window to see that ever-present reminder of my hometown crowing from Sign Hill: South San Francisco The Industrial City.

To quite a few of us that concrete message carries great meaning. When we were children, a day's fund meant a hike "up to the letters" and, if we dared, to slide down them sitting on the remnants of a cardboard box. The "I" was easiest to maneuver. The brave of heart would opt for an "S". As decades passed, The Sign became an integral part of our community psyche. Folks were known to storm the gates of that bastion of small-townism, City Hall, protesting even the most idle of comments that the sign may have reached the relic stage made by some disrespectful Johnny-come-lately techies whose vocabulary relegated "industry" to depths of a dictionary's glossary. It may have been true that the city had outgrown its industrial image of stockyards, meat plants and steel mills. So what? It's our sign.

When the founders of South San Francisco broke ground on this century-old community, their visions were in the clouds, but their hearts were in their pocketbooks. They came west to fill the needs of Swift, Armour, et al, and later expanded the industrial area to include the smokestack crow. There was an immediate need for homes for the factory workers. Real estate made some folks very wealthy, some wealthy and many prosperous. To hype the community, the sign was created. Initially made of powdered lime, the letters had to be regenerated rather frequently by loyal members of the Chamber of Commerce and real estate salesmen. During the boom time of the late 1910s and early 1920s, the backaches and blisters of using the lime yielded to blessed longevity of concrete letters.

This is not meant to demean those who created this town. My father, John Francis Mager, was among the earlier real estate sales people in town. Then in the 1920s he was in the Cattle Loan business and was active in promoting the Grand National Livestock Show (now at the Cow Palace) at the stockyards in South San Francisco. In the 1930s he served on the city council. My mother, Mary Vera Mulchy, was one of the early teachers in the newly established school district. Years later, while I was about town, bankers Jack "Jiggs" Bonalanza and Al Fourie, auto dealer Mario Volonte and other would remind me "Miss Mulcahy was my teacher." Both my parents were among the first congregants of All Souls parish.

They created their first home(adding five more Magers to the mushrooming population) at 721 Miller Avenue, a Craftsman house built by Robert Stickles, who was responsible for many of the early homes of the style. Later we moved across Third Lane to Stickles' former home at 722 Grand Avenue. It became my home for 53 years.

With seven in our household in the midst of a crushing depression, life had to be meager. Our Miller Avenue neighbors were generous. With the Melonis, Calligaris, Soldonis, and Reys on one side of the street and the Sciandris, Baldis, Fischers, and Scampinis on the other, there were plenty of good hearts and green thumbs. Chicken, eggs, rabbits and lush produce were proffered.

One of the great traditions of that time was fall wine making. Mountains of crated grapes lined the street in September. The heady redolence of the Vitis wafting along the avenue could test your sobriety. Those favoring white crushed and barreled their wine first. Weeks later the grape mountains reappeared and the red wines were made. Of course, at the proper time the godly elixirs were shared.

Those grape crates were important to the children. With few extra pennies for toys, some of the broken boxes were utilized, along with recycled roller skates, to make scooters and coasters to ride down the steep hill at Acacia and Miler avenues. Like many of the city's neighborhoods, the street would be barricaded and turned

into a playground for games of roller skate hockey, football or baseball played by teams chosen from the children, girls and boys alike. It was truly a street gang in the very best of terms.

The Depression also meant that much of the entertainment was provided by the citizens themselves. Talent shows, vaudeville and minstrel shows staged by various organizations were popular. The Fraternal Hall was the venue for numerous such events. My dad was quite an amateur showman. He loved to sing and dance. On occasion he was teamed in a song or dance with another young local talent, Gracie Allen.

I was smitten by the journalism bug in the eighth grade at the Junior-Senior High School and the ninth grade produced my first published article in the *Enterprise-Journal*. Rue Randall Clifford was my mentor and my idol. Her English classes were on a par with most college classes I experienced. Many of her students still can recede a line or two of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* – in Old English. It was thrill working in her Crow's Nest office preparing *The Iris* for publication. "Strive for Perfection" was her mantra and she admonished those who didn't.

An avid sports fan, Miss Clifford knew how to write sports and practiced her trade as a summer fill-in in the sports department at the San Francisco *Call-Bulletin* covering women's tennis. Writing sports for the *Enterprise-Journal*, which was my introduction to the business, meant I had to pass her keen journalistic eye before submitting anything to the EJ.

It was October 1946 when I turned pro. Publisher Logan Franklin hired me to be a reporter and to sell advertising. In the former task I passed muster. The latter left much to be desired. Among my first assignments was a city council meeting. Mr. Franklin stressed what I reported must be accurate and, when quoting anyone, use every word. Councilman Victor Boido, who operated a local bakery, was a wonderful person but peppered his conversations with "my gollies" this and "my gollies" that...When I turned in my city council story to the editor, I did so with a quiver of neophyte anxiety. My heart sank when I heard him giggle and then burst out laughing. One story and I was a failure! No, he just turned to me and said, "Good story, but let's leave out the 'my gollies'."

During my 53 years of news-papering, I was fortunate to interview some famous folks. There was chief Justice Earl Warren, who visited town regularly in earlier years when running for governor. Edmond "Pat" Brown was a great guy and an entertaining raconteur. His son, Jerry, was a real prig (may still be). There was jovial Governor Goodwin Knight and the always smiling Ronald Reagan. Among my most unique interviews was the "Godfather of California", Speaker of the Assembly Jesse Unruh at his Capitol office while he polished his boots. After Richard Nixon had left the vice presidency and was running for governor, he appeared at Magnolia Auditorium. Following his speech I greeted him as he stepped off the stage. He was not a tall man and I stood better than six-two. He immediately recognized the difference. Nixon backed up one stair and then another until I was looking up at him. Let the interview begin.

Congressman Leo Ryan, his daughter Erin, my wife Marilyn and I were leaving the Russian Embassy in San Francisco after attending a lavish reception. Across the street was a group protesting the Soviet policy of refusing its Jewish citizen's emigration to Israel. Amid the vocal lambasting from the crowd, the congressman walked straight to the heart of the group and identified himself. The jeers softened as he explained why he was there and expressed full agreement with their cause. When he left them several minutes later, there was a small smattering of applause. Back in South San Francisco we said our good byes. "Good bye" it was, for two days later he started his fateful trip to Jonestown.

I was on a media panel for a republican congressional debate between Shirley Temple Black, who was delightful, and Pete McCloskey, who was an arrogant ass. Alas the ass won.

Many more anecdotes about politicians could be related and, Lord forbid, even embellished, but much more

regarding was meeting the thousand of residents I rubbed elbows with while reporting events important to us all.

Few realize that the *Enterprise Journal* was a newspaper pioneer in so many ways. It was the very first newspaper west of the Mississippi (third in the USA) to use offset presses. The offset process, used in fine printing for years, allowed the aper greater clarity and universal use of photos. Logan Franklin took the first giant step in 1942, literally reading out of the book. Pioneers err sometimes. The very first photo was of Police Chief Louis Belloni, on the front page, heralding the change. The chief's picture was an inky blob. Tens of thousands of wonderful pictures of the community and its people followed that unfortunate debut. When sold by the San Mateo Times in 2000, the EJ was then the oldest continuous offset paper in the nation.

It also was a leader in using the cold-type form of makeup. Without getting too detailed, the transition said goodbye to the behemoth linotype machines belching lead lines of type which were later hand-made into columns and pages for the press. The very first test was to convert the metal letter-forming molds on the Linotype to metal jacketed film to be processed on rolls of photo paper; all without the use of metal. Later came the introduction of the very first word processor created for setting this "cold" type. This was followed by greater advancements in computerize typesetting equipment. Mr. Franklin worked diligently with the printing unions in those decades of the 1940s through the 1960s to help fulfill the collective visions of those in his beloved newspaper industry. In 1959 the *Enterprise-Journal* was the very first to install a 16-page Vanguard offset press specifically designed for newspapers. When sold to *The Times* in 1980, the newspaper had grown to a 40-page Goss press and was printing inserts for a major national drug chain and a myriad of other publications including the Catholic archdiocese, *The Monitor*. Along the way the publishing company grew into a chain of six community newspapers with a circulation in excess of 100,000. It also was the first non-metropolitan paper to print its own full color Sunday comic section.

When it all started, the newspaper was printed on a small 17-inch by 22-inch Webendorfer flatbed press. It could print only two pages at a time so the paper was run through, the printing plate changed, the paper flipped and run through again. Each four-page unit had to be machine-folded and then all units hand-collated and folded again by a rew of workers headed by Roy Keesling and marie Fowlker. Aileen Bramble Stankovich, sister of Logan Franklin, was co-editor and the principal photographer (until I came along to help). Her son, George Bramble, headed the crew of printers and Fred Cooper ran the lithograph department. All of them true pioneers.

As raw and primal as it may seem now, many of the concepts in those early days at the newspaper plant were later honed through generational advancements into the excellent quality of today's newspapers. I hope folks will appreciate that many of the first steps were taken in the shadow of Sign Hill.

The *Enterprise-Journal* may be gone, but, because of Logan Franklin, it should be seen as a genuine sparkling diamond in the crown of history for South San Francisco: The Industrial City.

Now, as for me: I was the fourth of the Mager progeny. John Thomas (Jack), Laura Jane (Jane), and Margaret Mary (Peggy) preceded me (George Vincent). Robert Ignatius (Bob) completed the quintet. It was a tad crowded in the one-bedroom house on Miller Avenue. My parents had a pull-down wall bed in the living room; Jack had a fold-up cot in the dining room. Jane, Peg, Bob and I jammed ourselves into the tiny bedroom. Everyone volunteered to take a bath first. First one in got the hot water. You could call us a very close family. God opened up the world to us when we moved into the 10-room, 4-bedroom *mansion* on Grand Avenue. Lots of elbow room *and* closet space! There was room to play ping pong on the dining room table, have class parties and dancing in the living room (barn dances in the garage) and load of space to gather in the kitchen while a holiday meal was being prepared.

Through Rue Clifford, I received a scholarship to UC Berkeley, but Uncle Sam made the matriculation briefer

than intended. After two years in Europe with the Army, I was back with the *Enterprise-Journal* and finished up at College of San Mateo.

It was in 1959 when I was lucky enough to marry Marilyn Ann Solem of Chisholm, Minnesota, who was an art teacher at Spruce Junior High. Logan Franklin thought it was the smartest thing I had every done so he named me editor. Marilyn and I were blessed with three daughters: Alicia Mary, Suzanne Maureen and Marya Therese. After excelling in the South San Francisco School District, all three graduated from San Francisco State University. Alicia earned a computer science degree and worked at Lockheed until she let motherhood take over. Suzanne received a degree (magna cum laude) in accounting and passed her CPA exams with flying colors. Marya, the athlete of the family played softball for the Gators, received her degree and became one of the youngest managers of a Bay Area Safeway store. The three have given us 10 grandchildren.

When the paper was sold to the *San Mateo Times* in 1980, I followed along and eventually worked the copy desk. In 1993 when I retired from the newspaper and Marilyn retired from the school district where she had worked as a junior high art teacher and later for two decades as an instructional aide and librarian at Spruce and Martin Schools and in the computer lab at Parkway Junior High.

Moving from the 10-room house we had enjoyed for 34 years together, we bought a 1,000 square foot cottage nestled on the banks of the San Lorenzo River in Boulder Creek. We can now sit on our deck reading *The Echo* and those wonderfully chatty letters from Lola Garcia to keep up the news of South San Francisco. Its not too far away. I can still see Sign Hill and The Sign in my memories.