

## Memoir: New Home and School

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*Mount Diablo*

*I keep thinking of things, so the sections you've seen are now longer.*

After the quarrels between my parents became severe, mom moved into a motel room in Redwood City, and we stayed there for weeks. I'm really not sure why, but we kids did not question her decision. The place has changed names, and it's still there, along El Camino. I can't quite remember what my sisters and I did, to get to school. I was riding my bicycle sometimes, it was miles closer than Huddart Park.

Elaine and Marilyn belonged to the Bluebirds, the youngest group within the Camp Fire Girls. Each year they would sell, not cookies, but chocolate candy. I'd save up and buy two boxes, light and dark mints. Then I'd ration myself, four each day, to make the stash last a couple of weeks. Keeping them in that little motel room. I now realize, my sisters also showed remarkable discipline, because none of the candy disappeared.

After my parents divorced, my parents sold the house and divided up their assets. So she got a good settlement. Enough to accomplish a lot, despite her difficulties with managing money.

I guess the New Age talk was rubbing off, with its nascent hippie spirit. I did not want to attend the "straight" junior high school, which, we noted, had anti-vandalism bars on some of its windows.

My father always told me he did not understand this, because, it would be the same kids I'd been with in sixth grade. The whole thing was more visceral, we all wanted to try something new. Mom took us around to visit a number of private schools, some of which (I now realize) were quite expensive.

Eventually we came upon a self-described alternative school, called Pinel, which had been operating in Martinez for several years. This was farther east than El Cerrito, and we'd have to move quite a ways. The school had purchased six rural acres along Reliez Valley Road, a mile or so south of the town. Later I found out, the financing had been approved by a Walnut Creek banker named Pete Stark, who went on to be the first avowed atheist elected to the US Congress.

Several teachers, mostly from Berkeley, were its founders and staff. This included each husband and wife, as a professional team. They also had an agreement with Antioch College in Ohio, which sent out a bunch of student-teachers, each of whom would stay for a year or so. They were adamant that it wasn't an "experimental" school, rather it was patterned upon the famous Summerhill school in England. They intended this, and did it.

The school never got large, no more than a hundred students in any given year. Many came from Berkeley, riding an old yellow school bus every day. In going through the Caldecott Tunnel, when I occasionally rode along, some of us formed odd little traditions, like holding our breath all the way through, or doing a robot-esque chant of meep-meep!-meep!! from one end to the other.

But first we had to get near the place. Mom rented a newly-built tract house near Reliez Valley Road,

about a mile south of the school. A few months later we bought a place, one long block away. Thus moving from Lafayette to Pleasant Hill, the city limits are kinda complicated around there.

I very quickly picked up on the leftist and environmental hippie ethic of the school. For example, at one edge of that housing tract, the hill has been carelessly filled in, then slipped, so that several new houses had to be removed. I think the statute of limitations has passed, so I can explain. I did not want more houses going in. A bit of night time shovel work diverted gutter rainwater over into the widening cracks, in those empty lots. It was many years until someone re-graded that hillside and put back houses.

Slowly those hills have gotten built up, and the same land-use-or-preservation battles continue. Up above is Briones Regional Park, which soon became a favorite. It too has expanded, until by now, a newer entrance enters the hills right next to the former Pinel campus. (Now in use as the Briones Horse Center stables, with some of the original buildings.

Our entire family was quirky, not always good neighbors, if inadvertently. Sometimes folks would move in with us, for example, a daughter of the Headley family stayed a while.

Because all those hills were graded, there was no topsoil and little water, so things didn't grow very well. Mom picked out trees and I planted them, several survived and are now huge. A later owner added a second story, so I barely recognize the place!

We lived in that house when the first moon landing took place. I recall watching on TV, stepping outside and looking up at the moon, then went back to the TV again. So awesome!

I kept reading science fiction, voraciously, and "return to the moon" stories have become a sub-genre in their own right. How could I have known, more than half a century later, those would still be fiction.

One time mom was away for a long day, and she asked the lady next door to keep an eye on me. But I did not know it, and went over to a school mate's house for a few hours. The neighbor lady was understandably upset, though there was little I could do.

Even as she was chastising me, in the front yard as I got home, a launch from Vandenberg Air Force Base was self-destructed at high altitude. So a spectacular trail of colorful ions spread across the western sky. A strange juxtaposition.

One summer day I decided, for the first time in my life, to stay up all night. By then, we had a newfangled color TV, and most stations had switched to a 24-hour broadcast schedule. I did not like coffee, and on my own gumption, managed to do it. Watching the sunrise over the Concord hills.

We had a great view of Mount Diablo, always a favorite place. Once mom drove us up there, and the summit road was covered in migrating tarantulas. Another time, I saw a baby rattlesnake. Decades later, in three stages, I jogged from the base (in Alamo) to the summit. Then, in one more stage, up the other side, from Clayton.

One evening, from our own backyard, we saw some UFOs. I don't mean flying saucers, rather a sort that (I later learned) is also common, fuzzy colored lights. There was a broken cloud deck, and because of nearby Mount Diablo's almost-4000 foot elevation, we knew the clouds were at around 2000 feet.

There were, as I recall, about four orange and two blue objects, too small to see any details. They swarmed around within a small area, like a bunch of fireflies, within an open area between thick clouds. One by one they winked out.

I suppose there are plausible human-made explanations, though I've never heard one. Surely others saw those objects, though sorry to say, I did not hear any feedback from the media or friends.

We did continue our summer vacation driving trips, unfortunately without dad. I recall going to the state's Anza-Borrego park, in the Mohave desert. Later, due to simple naïve carelessness, mom lost a lot of money, attempting to buy property (sight unseen) near Anza-Borrego along the Salton Sea. I don't think it was a scam, she just lost interest, and/or couldn't make the payments.

Dad moved into an apartment complex in Redwood City, one large building next to the railroad line. The place had a pool and a sauna, which we kids really enjoyed. Thinking of our Swedish heritage, we'd get it cranked up to a dry 160°F or higher.

We'd sleep over, in that small place, and dad would fix us scrambled eggs with diced spam for breakfast. Of course we'd add ketchup and Tabasco sauce. Dad had a new girlfriend in town, who we liked, though for whatever reason, they never moved on to marriage.