

The Novato Historian

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Preserving Novato's History Feature Section

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The Gnos Family

by Mike Read

The Gnos family came from Switzerland and the family spoke German. The family name was Gnoß and the father of Frank Gnos was named John. His mother was named Julia and she was born in 1845 in Switzerland. She would come to the United States in 1904, probably after her husband died. She would live in the area of one of her sons, Joseph A. Gnos, who was born in 1864 and came to the United States in 1895. He lived in the Scranton Pennsylvania area. Julia would have four sons, three were alive in 1910.

Frank Gnos was born January 6, 1862, and immigrated to the United States in 1885, probably with his brother John. He would change his last name to Gnos. They would run a dairy in the 1890's called the Gnos Brothers and their ranch was on San Bruno Avenue near Wayland in South San Francisco.

The 1900 U.S census showed Frank living in Union, San Joaquin County, (Union Island is south west of Stockton California), with James Hutchison (30), who was the head of the house. Frank (38) was a boarder with his wife Rosalie (34) and his sons Frank (9), Joseph (7) and (William) (2).



Shown here in a Gnos portrait taken circa 1920 are, from left, bottom row, Rosalia, George and Frank Sr., and top row, Joe, Bill, Ed and Frank Jr. (inserted from an older photo because he died in 1918).

The following is a story about Joe Gnos on his 90th birthday, which appeared in the Novato Advance on June 15, 1983.

THE NOVATO ADVANCE

June 15, 1983

By BARBARA GNOSS

Bits and pieces of Novato history were brought to life when friends and relatives celebrated Joe Gnos' 90th birthday.

Members of families whose names are part of Novato's history were

there – Nave, Rudolff, Baccaglio, Silva, Silveira, Hale and Salmina - to name a few.

The part of Novato we call "Old Town" was "New Town" when these people arrived. Old town for them was located near the tidewater terminus of Novato Creek in the South Novato Boulevard area.

The original post office was there, as was the Catholic Church, the Nave Fruit Stand and the Baccaglio Ranch.

Gnoss Family

When major commercial transportation shifted from water to rail and the train came to town, the town center shifted to Grant Avenue near the depot.

Joe Gnoss clearly recalls three-quarters of a century of living in Marin County. The Gnoss family was literally swept into Marin County by storm. Sometime in 1902, a break in the levy surrounding Bouldi Island in the San Joaquin Delta caused them to be flooded out of their home.

German-Swiss immigrant Frank and Rosalia Gnoss had come to the United States as newlyweds 17 years earlier and settled on the island where Frank went to work for dairy farmers.

Born in 1893, Joe was the third of Frank and Rosalia's seven sons. Joe remembers the births of a couple of his brothers. "Toward the end of her pregnancy, Dad would row mother and a couple of us younger kids downstream about two miles to the landing where we'd board a sternwheeler for San Francisco where the mid-wife lived. A couple days after the baby was born, we'd head back for home."

When the island flooded, the cows were barged down river. After a brief stay in South San Francisco, the Gnoss family and the dairy cattle relocated on a vacant ranch in Corte Madera, "right where Marin Joe's restaurant is today," said Joe.

"There wasn't much in Corte Madera when we moved there," he said, "just marshes and a salt outfit. They had salt ponds down there and would collect salt after the bay water evaporated... Convicts from San Quentin used to come over in horse drawn wagons to get water ' Joe added.

The family lost an 18-month-old child, Alex, while at the Corte Madera ranch. Joe found him one afternoon, lifeless, in a water trough. "I ran all the way to town to get a doctor," he said, "but it was too late."



Olive Avenue area, 1897. Foreground – DeVoto Ranch (present location of Olive School); white house at left is on Tilton Ranch. Olive Avenue runs in front of it. Frank Gnoss bought Tilton Ranch in 1905.

In 1905 the family was asked to return to the island ranch. Joe's father decided maybe it was time to start working for himself.

He had heard about a small farm for sale in Novato. The price was low because the owner was having financial problems.

He took out a loan for about \$4,000 and bought the 40-acre property plus an adjoining 10-acre parcel. The family packed all their belongings into a wagon, tied a cow to the tailgate and headed for their new home. The trip took a full day.

Gnoss and his oldest sons put their farming skills to work and the family settled into life in Novato. They attended the Catholic church, located on South Novato Boulevard where the Methodist church is today.

Joe remembers. "The priest used to say Mass every Sunday in Nicasio. Then come back to Novato in his horse and cart. We'd usually be there to open the gate for him."

The only other church in town at the time was the Presbyterian Church on the other side of town. "We used to call them psalm singers," said Joe. "It's funny, because now the Catholics are singing, too."

Joe attended seventh and eighth grades at Novato Grammar School, located high on a knoll in the middle of town on Grant Avenue.

The site now holds the city's police department, a gas station, a host of fast food establishments and a savings and loan. The school house was saved and now stands at the corner of Sweetser Avenue and Redwood Boulevard. Covered with aluminum paint, it houses the Novato Trading Company. While attending school, Joe and his brothers held down jobs at home and on other farms.

Joe remembers working for a character named Pounding. "He was a millionaire," said Joe. "He had the first car in Novato — a Dragon. He also had polo ponies and carriages

"Dad would get me up early in the morning and I'd have breakfast, then go over the hill to Pounding's. I milked a cow, fed the chickens and cleaned out the stables every day before school and for \$ 10 a month. "I remember having to run to town for him to buy El Belmont cigars."

After graduation from Novato Grammar in 1907, Joe went to San Rafael High School. But after one year, his parents asked him stay home and help out on the farm. After the day's farm work was done, there was time for recreation. Joe remembers there were dances in town the boys liked to attend. "The music was good and some of the dances lasted til three in the morning. We danced the two-step, the fox-trot and the waltz. There was this three-piece band — a piano, violin and trumpet. The piano player was one of the Pacheco girls."

Adds Joe, "Sometimes we went to dances out in Nicasio that were held in an old hotel there. We'd go by horse and buggy and wouldn't get home until seven in the morning."

Like some of his brothers. Joe moved to San Francisco in his late teens to learn a trade. Before leaving, however, he and his brother, Frank, pooled their savings and paid off the mortgage on the farm. Joe found work as a boilermaker and welder for the Iron and Steel Construction Co. He and his younger brothers, Bill (who later spent many years as a Marin County supervisor) and Ed, lived in a boarding house on Steiner Street run by a Mrs. Morrison.

"We would hand her our paychecks at the end of the week and she would take out the room and board and then bank the rest for us. She was like a mother."

The brothers usually went home on weekends to work on the farm. Occasionally, however, they got off the train in Mill Valley with friends and hiked the Dipsea Trail to Stinson Beach where they spent the day, slept overnight on the beach and then returned to the city on Sunday.

During World War I, a draft lottery was held. "They called 196 numbers," said Joe. "I was number 50. I wanted to go to war, but I was needed on my job where we were doing government work. We made air bottles for submarines."

Joe's brother Frank enlisted in the Army and died after contracting a fatal disease, now believed to have been the original swine flu, while training in North Carolina.



Tilton Ranch c.1890. The house would be replaced with a newer home in 1934.

In 1927, Joe returned to the Novato farm to work, joining his parents and his brother, Bill, who had returned five years earlier. His parents died in 1930 within three months of each other; Joe's mother of cancer Joe's father was distraught over his wife's death "They were very close. He just didn't want to live anymore without her."

The brothers built a new house in 1934. The three-bedroom home, with all the furnishings, cost about \$5,000. The Depression was still on, recalls Joe "Nine painters bid for the job. The carpenters charged \$7.50 per day and the laborers \$2.50.

Although times were bad elsewhere, the Novato ranch prospered. The brothers tended the orchard, harvesting peaches, apricots, pears and prunes. In its prime, the farm also housed 6,000 chickens, 10 milk cows, a couple of hogs, a small flock of turkeys and a large vegetable garden.

Joe always found time for community activities He was a volunteer fireman for 57 years and treasurer of the Druids, number 113, for 35 years.

An avid sportsman, he was one of the founding members of a deer club formed in 1933 that has been meeting every season without fail on the old Corda ranch run by Bill Moreda.

Joe and Bill continued to operate the farm until the late fifties when small farms became more difficult to run profitably. In the early sixties, the Gness family sold the major portion of the ranch property to a residential developer.

Joe has remained active in his retirement. He is a regular at the deer club and likes to fish in the bay for sturgeon and stripers.

He also likes watching the little league games at the school across the street. But most days, you will see him tending his yard and large garden.

When asked what advice he had to offer anyone set on living a long, healthy life. Joe answered. "Spend a lot of time outdoors, do some fishing and hunting and don't be afraid of hard work."

~ *Barbara Gness is the wife of George Gness Jr.*

Joseph A. Gness, who came to Novato with his farming family in 1905, died March 3, 1990, at home in his sleep at the age 96.



1975 -Pictured with the old Cleveland tractor that still functions perfectly in the vegetable garden of William Gness home on Olive Avenue are the four brothers Gness, all avid gardeners; Bill, 77; Joe, 82; Ed, 73; and George, 65.