

## Gas, murder and missiles in hills' history

By Kristin Delaplane

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Second in a series

Besides the Rush family, another noted early settler in the Potrero Hills was S. Clinton Hastings. Then a group of Scandinavians settled on the northern slopes; this area became known as Scandia (Little Norway).

However, many of these Scandinavians didn't stay long. As soon as they had legal title to their 160-acre plots, they sold the land to developers who took several of these plots and turned them into more profitable, larger farm units.

Another settler of the Potrero Hills was Johnny Casey, an Irishman.

Casey was a man of great strength. This story is an example of his legendary might:

He paid \$1 to wrestle a muzzled bear on the streets of San Francisco for a prize of \$10. The story goes that he was getting the better of the bear when his pants were torn and apparently falling off. The bear's trainer howled; "Let him up; that bear is getting mad." "Begorray," shouted Casey, "I'm getting a little mad meself." At that, he threw the bear.

For the better part of half a century, from the 1850s to the end of the century, the Potrero Hills remained a relatively quiet area for raising stock and growing wheat. Then in 1901, the Rochester Oil Co. was formed by a group of Suisun City residents.

A site for drilling for natural gas was selected just northwest of the Potrero Hills, based on the use of a divining rod similar to those used by some people searching for water to detect water sources for wells.

After drilling 1,800 feet, the workers hit a vein of natural gas. This dig also created an artesian system out of which came hot salt water.

The salt water was diverted and the natural gas was piped to Suisun City. With this find, the Rochester Oil Co. seemed headed for great returns of profit, but it was not to be. The gas soon proved unsuitable for household use, as the wet gas "viciously attacked" the town's pipelines.

The group then turned to the curative waters of the artesian well and proposed to

create a spa for bathing in the medicinal waters. Unfortunately, due to a lack of funds, the project never got off the ground.

The Burke Ranch was one of the ranches located in the Potrero Hills. It was seven miles from Suisun City.

Lee Branscomb rented and worked the Burke Ranch. He divided his time between the Burke Ranch and living with his mother and brother on the family farm, Branscomb Farm, which was located near the Burke Ranch.

In 1925, Lee Branscomb was at the Burke Ranch tending his flock of several hundred sheep during the lambing season. He also had a large acreage of grain sown that he was seeing to.

It was his custom to go back and forth between his place and his mother's at frequent intervals.

When he did not show up for lunch one day as expected, his brother Earl proceeded to the Burke Ranch to see what happened. There he discovered his brother's body in the kitchen, his head lying on a table as if asleep.

Upon closer inspection, he discovered that his brother was dead.

Earl Branscomb rushed to a neighboring farm, where he picked up Frank Peterson. The two went off to notify the family in Suisun and the Suisun Valley and then returned with the undertaker from Suisun City.

Upon examination it was discovered that Lee had suffered a gunshot wound to the left eye.

The sheriff's investigators examined the scene of the crime and found footprints in front of a window where one pane was gone, evidently where the gun had been fired.

No assassin was ever found. Rains washed away any footprints and the rifle bullet or pistol ball was shattered, so there were no clues to follow up on there either.

Indications were that the murder occurred the night before as Branscomb was sitting reading a magazine by lantern light. A Mr. Horn, a neighbor, reported that his daughter heard a gunshot shortly after 8 p.m.

Lee Branscomb was 35 when he died. He was born and raised in Solano County and had been a corporal during World War I, serving in France.

Branscomb was described as a quiet, industrious man, taking no time to attend social affairs and had no known enemies.

About 1945, oil companies started looking at the natural gas possibilities in the Potrero Hills. At this time there was successful commercial gas production in the Kirby Hill Field, approximately three miles southeast of the Potrero Hills.

The Atlantic Richfield Co. drilled a wildcat well on the Scally Ranch centrally located in the Potrero Hills. Well No. 1 produced gas for three months.

Eleven more exploratory wells were drilled, both on the Scally and Rush ranches, ranging from 3,000 to 9,000 feet in depth.

Pauley Petroleum and Standard Oil eventually joined Atlantic Richfield in these efforts. Though in most incidences gas was encountered, it was never enough for commercial production.

In the mid-1950s, a Nike missile site, Battery B of the 61st Field Artillery, was placed atop the Potrero Hills.

Nike surface-to-air guided missiles were fielded by the Army as air defense coverage, with the capability of being equipped with either conventional or nuclear warheads.

In 1964, the site of the Nike missile was offered for sale, and Explosive Technology Inc. located there the next year. This was an aerospace company that made explosives and pyrotechnic devices for the space program and high-performance aircraft.

In the late 1980s, the firm's name was shortened to ET. In the 1990s, ET was taken over by OEA Aerospace, which still operates at the eastern end of the Potrero Hills.

The west end of the hills is held by a solid-waste disposal plant. Only the middle portion of the area retains a flavor of the old days, with stock silently grazing on the hills.

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