

Early Schools in the San Ramon Valley

FOCUS:

- To understand the need for schools to educate children of the early settlers
- To understanding the locations of the first one-room school houses

MAIN IDEAS:

To use the information provided to understand early pioneer schools.

- The one-room schools accommodated children of all ages.
- The schools were very different from today's schools.
- The schools were located in various parts of our valley. This made the schools easier to reach for the children who lived on ranches and farms spread across the valley.

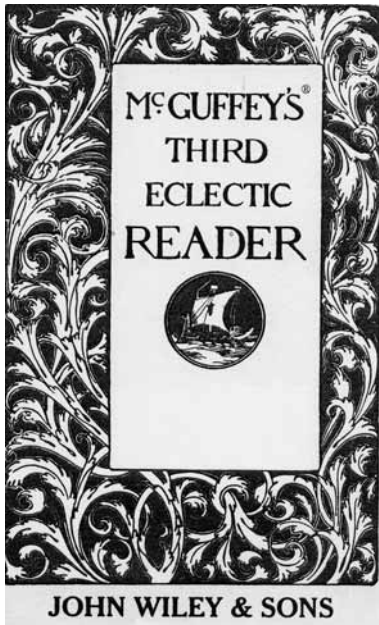
VOCABULARY:

One-room school house
McGuffey Reader
Slate



Student pages

Life in a One-Room School House



Like most kids in our valley in the late 1880, you lived on a farm or ranch and you went to a **one-room school house** with one teacher who taught every subject to students of all ages. The ages could range from 4 to 18. You would be grouped based on your spelling and reading ability, not your age.

You would go to school in the summer and winter because you would be needed to work in the fields in the spring and fall. You would do a lot of memorizing and copying. You would not write original stories but would copy from the Bible or textbooks. You might read from a **McGuffey Reader**.

You would sit on benches or in a wooden desk with a place for an ink jar. You would write with an ink pen or use chalk on a **slate board**. A wood-burning stove would keep you warm on a cold day. Your teacher would sit at the front of the room. Strict teachers demanded silence and obedience.

You would study reading, math, writing and would learn about the world from your textbooks. You would also be taught about how to become a good citizen.

Early Schools in Our Valley

When the first pioneers came to our valley, the children were taught at home. They only learned a little reading and writing. With more and more people coming to live in the valley, schools were needed to teach the children.

Teachers lived with families and taught in **one-room school houses**. The first schools were located in Alamo, the Sycamore Valley and the Green Valley, and downtown Danville on Front Street. The San Ramon school house was located in Limerick (later named San Ramon).



To go beyond the eighth grade, students usually were sent to board in Oakland or San Francisco. The one period when higher grades were educated in our valley was in 1859, when the Union Academy was created. This was a boarding high school built in Alamo. It was a three-story building, the largest building in the whole valley. It burned down in the summer, nine years after it was built.

The San Ramon Valley Union High School opened in 1910 in a house on Church Street in Danville. It started with only 30 students and two teachers and served students from the whole Valley. Later the high school was relocated to its present location on Danville Blvd. The new high school was originally built in a mission revival style and was completed in 1916.

Kathie Petrie, 2004



San Ramon Valley High School circa 1930

Teacher Pages

Student Activities:

- **Critical Thinking**

1. Discuss the differences between our modern schools and the first schools. What is the same?
2. Think about what has created the change from the one-room school house to our modern schools.

- **Show What You Know**

1. Writing activity (classification skills) – Divide a paper in half lengthwise. On one side, list or draw the advantages of the one-room school- house in the 1800s. On the other side, list the disadvantages or difficulties faced by the children of this time.
2. Art activity - Create a poster comparing the early schools of the 1880s to our schools of today.

- **Comparing generations** (see special activity pages)

Field trips (See special section on field trips.)

- **Family field trip:** Visit the historical plaques which tell about the original schools (see page in this chapter and field trip section).
- **Passport Opportunity:** Go to the Tassajara One-Room School living history program with your class and experience school as it was in 1888.

Reading and Social Studies

Gloria Houston, *My Great Aunt Arizona*, Harcourt Brace
Diamond Cove, Harcourt Brace, pages 114-127.

History/ Social Science Standards:

- 3.b Understands and knows how to analyze human and chronological relationships and patterns
- 3.e Interprets historical events.
- 3.3 Draws from historical and community resources to organize the sequence of events in local history and describe how each period of settlement left its mark on the land.

Additional Resources

Activity pages

Comparing generations -- school (parent and student pages)

Pictures

A. J. Young, San Ramon Valley teacher
Pictures of early schools

Essay

Early Schools in the San Ramon Valley
Bret Harte tutored valley youth

Early school site with historical plaques: Alamo, Sycamore Valley, San Ramon, Tassajara

Websites

Look up One Room School House history – several choices

Books

- Jones, Virgie V., *Remembering Alamo...and Other Things Along the Way* (Alamo: Morris-Burt Press), 1975
- Jones, Virgie V., *Historical Persons and Places...in San Ramon Valley* (Alamo: Morris-Burt Press), 1977
- 373.12 HISTORY (BOOK ON TAPE) – History of the founding of the San Ramon Valley Union High School District

Schools

- J 973.5 *Ultimate Field Trip 4* by Susan Goodman
- J 973.5 *Life on a Pioneer Homestead* by Sally Senzell Isaacs

Early Schools in the San Ramon Valley

Schools were needed as young families moved in. Schooling took different forms. Several settlers hired teachers and had home schools in the early years; the Stones, Norrises and Harlans were three of these. Bret Harte, the famous western writer, tutored Abner Bryant's four sons in Tassajara Valley during 1856. Teachers boarded with families and taught in various one-room school houses, including ones in Alamo, Danville, Green Valley and Limerick (later San Ramon).

To go beyond eighth grade, students usually were sent to board in Oakland or San Francisco. The one period when higher education was available in the Valley was from 1859 to 1868 when the Union Academy, a boarding high school (with day students) begun by the Cumberland Presbyterian Church, was built in Alamo.

George McCamley's diary talks about going to church and to other events in the "School House." The 3-story Academy was the largest Valley building of that period. According to Munro-Fraser in a *History of Contra Costa County*, "It had a short life, and died a natural death; it was too far in advance of the times and the wants of the community who then resided in the beautiful San Ramon valley." The Academy burned down in 1868 during school vacation.

From Yesteryear in the San Ramon Valley, 1830-1870, Ranchos & Ranches, p. 8.

A High School for the Valley

For years Valley families sent their students to one-and two-room schools which were scattered throughout the area. These schools included Alamo, Green Valley, Danville, Sycamore Valley, San Ramon, Tassajara and Highland. But after eighth grade no schooling was available locally. For a decade in the 1860s the Union Academy offered advanced schooling but, for over 40 years, students went to Oakland or San Francisco after grammar school.

A Danville Grange Committee in 1909 began investigating the procedures for a local high school and organized a district composed of several grammar school districts. John Baldwin, William R. Meese, Charles J. Wood, David Bell and W. E. Stewart were the first school board members and Mr. A. Cutting was the first principal.

In 1910 the first classes began and the school was named San Ramon Valley Union High School. Two teachers and about 30 students began classes in August of 1910 in the cottage of Harvey Eddy on Church Street in Danville. By 1914 another teacher was needed and, in 1914, the school moved to a vacant store building on Front Street.

Classes were held upstairs in what had formerly been the Odd Fellows lodge meeting room.

In 1916 a 10-acre site was purchased from Robert McAdoo and a mission-style building with a courtyard was built. The first students attended classes in the new school during the 1916-17 school year. A 1920 state law added the Tassajara and Highland grammar schools to the High School's district.

Vivian Coats Edmonston, who graduated from the Sycamore Valley Grammar School in 1914, rode six miles each day to high school, boarding in Danville for two months or more during the worst of the winter's rainy weather. She recalled that there were four upstairs rooms with four teachers who taught history, English, math, chemistry, physics, Latin and Spanish. Electives included sewing, cooking and surveying. Vivian was the only girl in a six-member surveying class; she remembered that well since they were able to meet outdoors. "We surveyed out in a field across from the school. I did as well as the boys and I was good with the transit."

School became the center of activities for the valley, as student plays, graduations and sport events brought out the whole community. The Fraternal and Social Hall on Front Street had a large room in which basketball games were played and large meetings held. In the early years Vivian Edmonston recalled athletics as "a sad affair." There were too few students to go out for certain teams, either boys or girls. She said "For uniforms, we wore big baggy bloomers and a middy blouse."

In a March 10, 1923, *Danville Grange Herald*, school trustee W. E. Stewart wrote an article praising the abilities of SRVUHS graduates attending UC Berkeley. According to figures sent from the University which noted the percentage of college freshman receiving passing grades, Danville had 100 %, Concord 92% and Martinez 69%.

From *Yesteryear in the San Ramon Valley, 1910-1945 --Good Times, Hard Times, pp. 14-15.*

Bret Harte tutored Tassajara youths

THE name of one of the West's most famous writers, Bret Harte, appears often in histories of the San Ramon Valley.

Just what did Bret Harte have to do with the Valley?

The story begins in March 1854. Bret Harte, age 18, arrived in California with his sister to stay with their mother and stepfather in Oakland. At that point he was already writing, and his experiences as a young man in the state's booming years provided grist for his articles and poetry for years to come.

One part of that experience was set in the San Ramon Valley where, in September of 1856, he became a tutor for Abner Bryant's four sons - Tom, Wise, George and Jonathan. Bryant had a ranch near Alamo Creek in the Tassajara Valley. The 1855 County Assessor's book states that Bryant had 83 Spanish mares and horses, 238 head of cattle, 652 Spanish sheep, two wagons and one buggy.

According to a letter Harte wrote to his sister dated Oct. 8, 1856, Bryant also "had four young sons, and not caring to have them grow up like range-cattle, he decided to have a tutor."

"There is nothing of the rural character of a farm, saving the corral at the bottom of the field and the haystack at the top, and whole place is as wild as the God of nature made it," Harte added.

The ranch house was "a mere shanty that might be a hunter's cabin in the wilderness." Bryant, according to Harte, was "not a farmer, but a drover" - certainly a good writer's word for rancher.

Also in this letter, Harte commented that "Mr. Bryan(t) is a very religious man." That autumn the young writer joined the Bryants at an evangelical camp meeting in the Valley; later he wrote an article called "An Apostle of the Tules" which described the emotionalism of this variety of frontier religion.

Another article he wrote, which appeared in the October 1863 Atlantic Monthly as "A Legend of Monte Diablo," showed that he probably climbed to the summit while he lived in its shadow.

Although he is credited with romanticizing the gold rush period in California, many of his works also recount the era's harshness, isolation and simplicity. Surely his stint with the Bryant boys in the wilds of the Valley helped to give those writings some of their veracity.

Works by Bret Harte which may have drawn upon San Ramon Valley in the 1850s include *Cressy*, *The Convalescence of Jack Hamlin* and *A First Family of Tassajara*, *The Queen of the Pirate Isle*.

- This article on BRET HARTE was written by Beverly Lane and published in the *Valley Pioneer* in January 7, 1987.

Comparing Generations -- School

Student _____

Date _____

We have visited a one room school house and we have some idea what school was like for students many years ago. Now, think about our school and write down some information that tells what our school is like.

What is the name of our school?

Where is our school located?

How many students are in our school?

What grades are in our school?

How many students are in our class?

Describe the school building. What does it look like? What kind of special rooms does it have?

Describe the playground. What kind of special equipment does it have?

How much time do you spend on homework?

What special classes do we have?

Describe discipline in our school.

Do we have any after-school classes? What classes do you take?

Do we have band or chorus? Do you take band or chorus?

What is your favorite thing about our school?

Comparing Generations -- School

Dear Parents,

As part of our local history project we are studying the history of education in our valley. As part of this study we will visit a one room schoolhouse and talk about what school was like for students many years ago. In class we have talked about our school and how it is different from schools long ago. During the coming week we would like you to talk to your child about the school you went to when you were in third grade. It would be great if your child could ask the same questions to a grandparent or an older parent.

How many students were in your school?

What grades were in your school?

How many students were in your class?

Describe the building.

Describe the playground.

Did you have homework? How much?

Did you have special classes? (ex. library, music, art, computers, science lab, other)

Did you have after school classes?

Did you have band?

Did you have a cafeteria? What kind of food did it serve?

Is there anything else you can tell your child about your school?

Albert Jefferson (A. J.) Young The Valley's School Teacher



A. J. Young, seated at right, was a leader in the educational and religious life of the San Ramon Valley for many years. His wife Mary Shuey Young was a teacher as well. He taught in several grammar schools, including San Ramon, Sycamore Valley, Tassajara and Danville. He was also an elder in the Presbyterian Church and was superintendent of the Presbyterian Sunday school from 1863-1929.



Danville Grammar School, AJ Young far right

Early School Sites With Historic Plaques

Alamo School, Wilson and Livorna Roads, Alamo

Original 1880 Alamo School Bell in courtyard
Plaque dedicated in 1974

Alamo Grammar School, NW corner of Danville Blvd. and Stone Valley Roads, Alamo

Site of historic school on this corner (1876-1957)
Plaque dedicated in 1999

San Ramon Grammar School, 2233 San Ramon Valley Blvd., San Ramon

Site of historic school (1867-1960)
Plaque dedicated in 1997

Sycamore Grammar School, North side of Camino Tassajara between Wood Ranch and Liverpool Roads.

Site of history school. (1866-1927)
Plaque dedicated in 1996

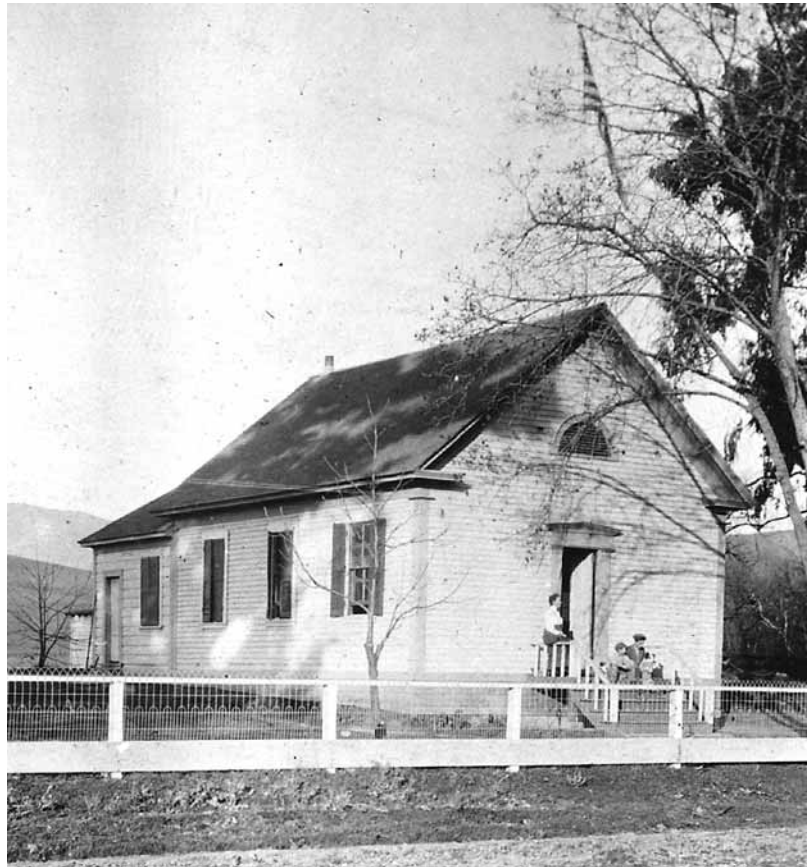
Tassajara Grammar School, 1650 Finley Rd., Tassajara Valley

Active school from 1889-1946
Plaque dedicated in 1999

2004



Tassajara Grammar School



Sycamore Valley Grammar School



San Ramon Grammar School



Alamo Grammar School