

Historical Highlights of Santa Clara Valley

March 1999

FREMONT AND CORA OLDER OF WOODHILLS

by Jack Douglas

Fremont and Cora Older built their unique country home in the hills above Cupertino in 1913 when Fremont was at the peak of his illustrious career as crusading San Francisco newspaper editor. This was the Olders' first home. They had been living in various San Francisco hotels and had not had the time nor the resources to find a home in the city.

In the process of driving about to explore the state, the Olders discovered the beauties of the Santa Cruz Mountain locale. A number of their friends, Erskine Scott Wood, Clarence Darrow, Senator Phelan and the Norrises, to name several, were also drawn to the area, and a plan was hatched to build a colony or retreat for progressive artists, writers and intellectuals. This idea failed to materialize, but a number of the group decided to build their residences in the area.

Early Years

Fremont Older was born in 1856 on his grandfather's farm near Appleton, Wisconsin. The farm, worked by Fremont's father and other relatives, was a successful enterprise until hostilities broke out between the North and South. Squire Auger, Fremont's grandfather, was an idealist and dedicated reader of Horace Greeley's *Tribune*. When war was declared the old man watched the eligible men of the family march away to join the cause to free the slaves. He was to pay a horrific price for his patriotism, for Fremont's father and six of his uncles would all die of war injuries.

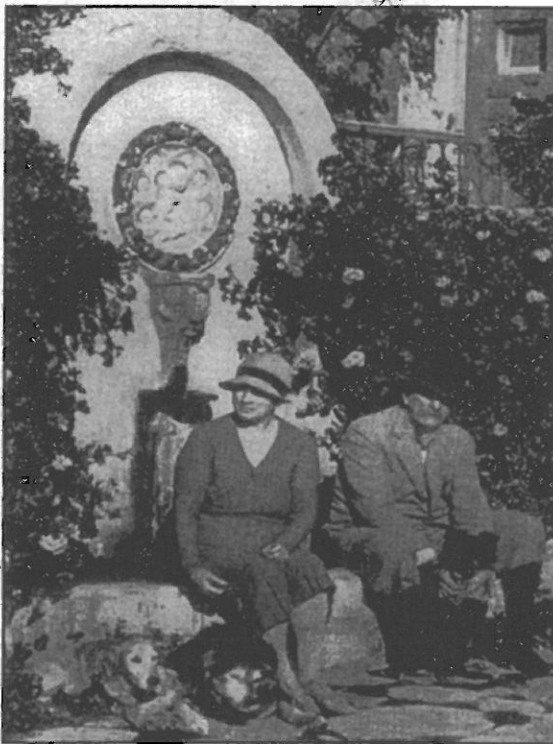


photo courtesy of Mr. Levine

Cora and Fremont Older and their dogs near the adobe building c. 1930.

Without the men to run the farm the remaining family members became destitute. At the age of ten Fremont was forced to work for neighboring farmers and to follow the harvests to distant locations. As a teenager he took whatever temporary jobs he could find, including one as a printer's devil. This led to work as a tramp printer. Once exposed to the world of print, and with memories of his grandfather's admiration of Horace Greeley, young Older knew his destiny would be found in the editing of important newspapers.

With the help of his mother, now remarried and living in California, Fremont took the train to San Francisco where he arrived at age 17 ready to carve out a career as newspaperman. He began as a freelance reporter, submitting pieces to any paper that would print them. Perhaps because of his experience with poverty he was to make his name in journalism as a writer of human interest stories. All through his life he had deep sympathies for those down on their luck, and he always emptied his pockets to anyone in need.

During this period he met and married Cora Baggerly, an attractive, talented woman who gave up a comfortable life in the East for this footloose reporter.

Edits San Francisco Bulletin

Fremont was working as a reporter for the *San Francisco Call* when he got his first big break—the editorship of the historic *San Francisco Bulletin*. Once a leading daily in the city, *The Bulletin* had only 9,000 subscribers when Older took the reins.

Both Olders set to work putting out the *Bulletin*. In the next few years they were to make many innovations which revolutionized the looks and content of not only their paper but that of other American newspapers as well. Front pages, which had previously been covered with advertising, now had illustrations and banner headlines. Cora's brother, Hiland Baggerly, created what was to become the modern sports section. More room was given to

social events, and serialized novels became a regular feature. Within a decade the *Bulletin* became the most read of the city's six daily newspapers.

As editor, Fremont trained and inspired his reporters and gave them a free hand in writing their own stories, and in so doing, he developed some of the best writers in the nation. This outstanding reportorial staff would work for low wages out of loyalty to their editor.

Political Muckraking

Having a popular newspaper was not enough for Fremont Older. He wanted to make a difference in his city. One of his first efforts was a series on the prostitution problem in Chinatown. The articles

were sympathetic to the women and critical of the men who profited from it, including the police, the politicians and many members of the upper classes.

Older's campaign against graft, payoffs and kick-backs led many advertisers to withdraw their support of the *Bulletin*, and subscriptions dipped, but the paper thrived because it told the truth. Sales on the street corners skyrocketed. R.A. Crothers, the conservative owner of the *Bulletin*, was personally offended by his paper, but he did not interfere as long as the money rolled in.

To clean up the corrupt city government, Older entreated businessman James D. Phelan to run for mayor. With the *Bulletin's* support Phelan won and began the process of taming San Francisco's frontier politics. Phelan lasted for three terms until the election of his successor Eugene Schmitz, a machine candidate controlled by Boss Abe Ruef. It was back to business as usual.

3

With everyone on the take or looking the other way Fremont Older had difficulty finding anyone to help champion the cause of civic reform. Besides Phelan, only one other man from the social elite, Rudolph

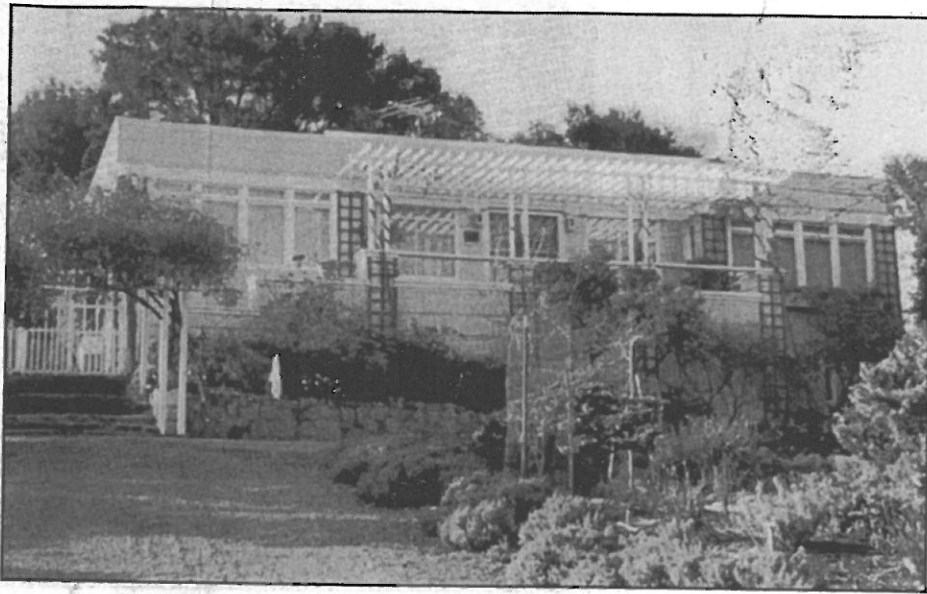
Spreckles, got behind the crusade. Older and Spreckles went to Washington to enlist the help of President Theodore Roosevelt who assigned U.S. Attorney Francis Heney and detective William Burns to smoke out the corruption. During the succeeding trials Older was kidnapped (he escaped unharmed) and Heney was shot. Heney's assistant, Hiram Johnson, who carried the case to a successful conclusion, was later to become governor of California. Kidnappers Reuf and Schmitz were tried and convicted.

Older visited Reuf in prison and felt sorry for him. The real culprits, thought Older, were the so-called respectable people who paid off the city officials. Having put Reuf in jail, Older now wrote editorials asking for his early release.

Appalled by the conditions in the state prisons, Older launched the *Bulletin* into efforts for prison reform and banishment of the death penalty. He also carried out a lifelong crusade to free Tom Mooney, the labor radical accused of setting off a bomb during a preparedness parade on Market Street in 1916. Older's reporters unearthed evidence that witnesses were paid to lie at Mooney's trial, but the establishment decided that it was safer to keep Mooney behind bars. He was not pardoned until 1939, three years after Older's death.

Advocating freedom for an alleged radical bomber was too much for the owners of the *Bulletin*, and they began to restrict Older. Reluctantly he took the offer to become editor of Hearst's *San Francisco Call*. Many of his liberal supporters felt that he had sold out, but Hearst, knowing what a jewel he had in Older, let him continue his various campaigns for reform. Many of Older's best people followed him to the *Call*, and it soon became the city's most popular evening paper. The *Bulletin* was later absorbed by the Hearst syndicate to become the *Call-Bulletin*.

photo courtesy of Jack Doulgas



Woodhills, as it looks now in 1999.

At Home in Woodhills

In the midst of the turmoil of politics in San Francisco, Fremont and Cora Older found quiet and companionship in the quiet hills overlooking the Santa Clara Valley. Their new home, designed by the noted San Jose architect Frank Delos Wolfe, was ideally constructed to take advantage of the views but not to detract from the rural setting.

Cora, who wrote extensively about early California missions and lifestyles, rescued one of downtown San Jose's last adobe buildings and had it reconstructed as a study near their swimming pool. Fremont commuted to San Francisco on the railroad which passed not far away. Fremont Station, a small stopping place along the line, was named in his honor.

Fremont could return to his country roots as he walked his dogs through the sunlit hills. Cora created an extensive array of terraced gardens around the house and planted them with her favorite roses. Consistent

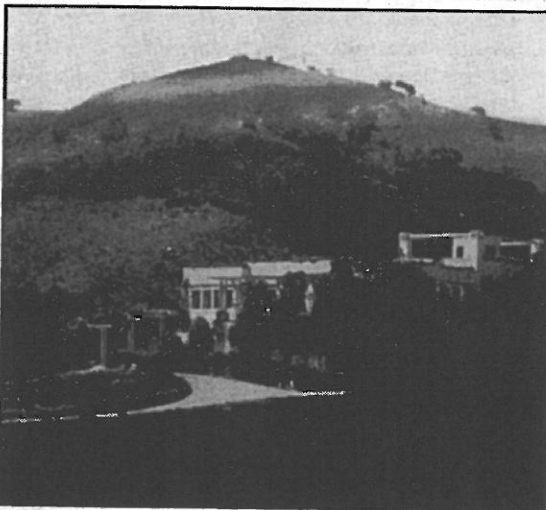
with his ideas on prison reform, Fremont employed many former inmates to work on the gardens. Jack Black, a professional criminal turned author whom Older saved from a long prison term, was frequently a dinner guest along with judges, senators, artists and reformers.

While Fremont's professional life centered on San Francisco, Cora's was concentrated on San Jose and Santa Clara County. (See the author's chapter: "Cora Older: Of Romance and Roses" in *Historical Footnotes of Santa Clara Valley*.) She was a frequent guest at Senator Phelan's soirees at Villa Montalvo.

As one of the nation's most acclaimed newspaper editors Fremont Older groomed a number of loyal writers who would go on to make names for themselves in the literary world. They included: Maxwell Anderson, Kathleen Norris, Sinclair Lewis, Edith Daley, Robert Duffus, John Francis Neylan, Bruce Bliven, Richard Barry and numerous others. Older's integrity, humanity and dedication to his profession drew followers from all walks of life. A newspaper man to the end, he edited the *Call-Bulletin* until he died in 1935 at the age of 79. Cora maintained Woodhills as a gathering place for prominent figures in politics and the arts until her death in 1968.

Woodhills fell into neglect and was threatened with demolition until it was saved and beautifully restored by newspaper publisher Morton Levine and his wife, Elaine Levine. Listed on the National Register of Historic Places and surrounded by the Mid-Peninsula Open Space District, Woodhills remains in its natural setting; a tribute to the Olders who found their first permanent home overlooking our valley.

photo courtesy of Mr. Levine



Woodhills, as it appeared in c. 1916, with the hills planted.