



SHOW NOTES & TRANSCRIPT

EPISODE SHOW NOTES

Episode Title: The Past Predicts Current San Mateo

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About this Episode: Everything old is new again? Judy digs up delicious info in San Mateo's archives.

Episode Web Page: <https://sanmateofocus.com/past-predicts-current/>

EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

I'm Judy Gordon, and *this* is San Mateo Focus.

In search of some San Mateo history, I recently headed to the archives room at the San Mateo County History Museum in Redwood City. The museum and archives room are located at the old courthouse building downtown. Entering the archives is like visiting a library from years ago. It's very quiet. There are card catalogs only. You sign in with your name and address, and the librarians give you a blank paper to fill out for items you want them to pull from the archives. The librarian brings out the items, and you take one at a time back to your seat for review. I can guarantee that sometime in your perusal of hundreds of cards to find information sources, you'll appreciate the search power of Google.

Once I had the materials that I requested from the librarian in front of me, a few hours flew by, as I read through old newspaper clippings and San Mateo pamphlets from the early 1900s. I took a picture of an undated newspaper clipping, because it really showed the difference between writing a news article today from a century or more ago. The title of the article was "Swart and Liquor Dealer's Fist Fight Ends in a Draw." The lead paragraph reads "Hard words, hard blows and the still harder floor of the bar room in the new Sequoia Hotel, were the salient features in a rough and tumble fight today, in which District Attorney Swart undertook to settle differences with Thomas F. Burke, a San Mateo liquor dealer, without recourse to the code of civil procedure." That's a lot of words in one sentence.

There actually were plenty of San Mateo books, clippings, images and announcements to sift through. But I settled on two stories, from roughly the same timeframe, that might indicate the earliest roots of diverse restaurants and innovative technology that San Mateo is known for today.

In 1920, a group of wealthy investors, civic groups, and politicians got behind the idea for a startup that would make San Mateo the Hollywood of the North by building Pacific Studios on Peninsula Avenue. The organizers encouraged locals to buy \$100-dollar shares in the studios. The investors felt that the area around Northern California was better suited than Southern California for movies shot on location because they could be adapted to look like other areas of the country. 103 acres were purchased east of the railroad tracks. About half a million dollar's worth of construction was completed. There were two four-story film stage units and special effects equipment and film labs. The lab facilities were state of the art, with the capacity of more film per hour than studios in



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Hollywood. There were storm-making machines, and an artificial lake where 12-foot waves could be simulated, which was perfect for filming navy battles. Just a few movies were ever shot at Pacific Studios. The most famous was *White Hands*, which was completed in 1922. It was a melodrama featuring an evil sea captain named Hurricane Hardy who was searching for treasure. He was reformed when the white hands of a child stopped him. Pacific Studios was unfortunately eventually a failure. It turned out that as an independent studio, it didn't have the distribution outlets that Hollywood studios had and couldn't attract the actors and technicians to make it successful.

Around that same time in 1920, chef Noah Williams settled his family in San Mateo. Noah had previously worked as a chef for Southern Pacific, where he cooked all the food in the dining cars of the coast division trains. He rented a space at 139 B street and opened a cafeteria. It was a great location because B street was the commercial heart of San Mateo. Noah's Cafeteria was a wild success. He was famous for his baked hams and was soon carving over 20 hams a day. Gradually, the word spread about Noah's food and because Sunday drives were becoming popular with families, the lines for Sunday dinner at Noah's were around the block. By the mid 1920s, Noah arranged to lease a new building on 3rd Avenue near El Camino. This was the first important building constructed in this area of Downtown. When it was finished in 1925, Noah's Ark, was said to be one of the most modern and beautiful restaurants to open in the West. The decorations carried out the biblical story of Noah, with huge oil paintings of giraffes, lions, goats, elephants, deer, and hippos. Wild animals were portrayed marching around the iron lighting fixtures. The food was still great, and the crowds continued to visit. Noah tried to keep the restaurant open through The Depression, but he was forced to close in 1931. His final job was as the Chef for the Paulist Fathers at Old St. Mary's in San Francisco, where he died in 1962.

Think about the possibilities of going out in the early 1920s in and around Downtown San Mateo. You could have dined inside a sophisticated restaurant that drew people from all over the Bay Area, with the possibility of a famous actor or actress from Pacific Studios sitting at the table next to you. Check out the archives room at the history museum and discover more stories of San Mateo. But, *Here's the Deal*: the hours for the archives are different from the museum, so make sure to check before you go.

Okay, that's all the time we have for this episode. Have a great week. Thanks to Jack Radsliff for the original music to this podcast. If you'd like more information about our sponsor or the topics in today's episode, go to sanmateofocus.com.

HELPFUL LINKS:

[San Mateo County Historical Association Website](#)

[Archives Web Page](#)

[Hours and Admission](#)

[Article: "Hollywood North"](#)

[IMDB Listing: "White Hands"](#)

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PODCAST SHOW NOTES

Podcast Name: San Mateo Focus



Description: Whether you're new to San Mateo, California, or a long time resident, the San Mateo Focus Podcast is the place to learn about local history, good eats, and things to do.

Website: <http://www.sanmateofocus.com>

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