

“Rooshia Town” Memories

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This story centers on the first twelve years of my life living in “Rooshia Town” in Fresno, California. Parts of the story involve my two sisters and brother who shared some of their memories with me, however, most of the recollections are mine. The time period covers 1938 when I was borne to 1950 when my family left Nicholas Street to move to Madera where my brother realized his lifelong dream of becoming a farmer.

I grew up at 2251 Nicholas Street in the German Town section of Fresno, California. It was also known as “Rooshia Town” and was considered a blue collar part of Fresno. Living down the street from our house was my grandparents and uncle on the Siebert/Seibert side. I don’t know when our name was changed from Seibert to Siebert and it is a puzzle that will keep me searching records. I have my theories and suspicions, but they have yet to be proven.

Germantown was composed primarily of one-story bungalows and large religious structures dating from the late nineteenth century through the mid-twentieth century. The bulk of construction in Germantown occurred between the late 1800s, when the construction of Fresno’s West Side commenced, to the 1930s when the number of buildings constructed diminished due to the Great Depression and other economic pressures. Few structures from the nineteenth centuries remain. Over the years the character of Germantown has been greatly affected by the demolition and alteration of buildings and the construction of freeways. Germantown, or “Rooshia Town” (a pejorative term used by those outside the community as well as inside), grew for almost fifteen years (1900-1914) and developed into a large triangular area of land bounded by Church Street, Mono Street, G Street, and Fruit Street. A former resident of Germantown recalled, “It was one of the cleanest sections of Fresno. Every Saturday, we went out with willow brooms and swept the alleys. We didn’t have lawns, just flowers and gardens. Germantown was known throughout the Fresno area for its clean streets, tidy yards, and fastidious care of homes.

The lot on which the house at 2251 Nicholas Street was built was 7,500 square feet and the house itself was 898 square feet. There were also other structures on the property consisting of a building which had been turned into a garage, a large metal building which was used for wood storage (wood used for a heater in the house and cooking stove), and a chicken coop. The yard itself was large enough for a good sized garden and was dominated by a large and very fruitful apricot tree. That tree provided the family with numerous and plentiful crops which were canned and made into preserves. Also on the lot were boysenberry vines whose fruit were also preserved. Running along the back of the lot was an alleyway which separated houses on Nicholas from those on the next, Cherry Avenue. Garbage and trash were placed in the allies to be picked up.

Along one side of the driveway was my mother’s flower garden in which she planted Zinnias and Gladiolas. My brother later planted two peach trees that took up half of the garden when he returned from his service in the Navy. The driveway itself was dirt, although it was packed until it was hard as concrete from the many sweepings and waterings that my mother undertook to

keep the yard neat and clean. The sidewalks were also dirt and unpaved, but hard as concrete. In front of the lot were two gigantic elm trees which produced lots of leaves, but in those days after they were swept, we could burn them in the gutter.

The house was of wood frame construction and painted red. Most of the houses in the immediate neighborhood were also of wood frame construction leading to many fires and eventually vacant lots. There were two fires near our house: one across the street which awakened me during the summertime and burned to the ground, and another next door in a rented bungalow which started from a cooking grease fire. While the houses themselves were of unremarkable architecture, they were very similar to those I later saw in Russia during my many trips there, which upon reflection is not unusual since "Rooshia Town" was built by immigrant Germans from Russia. Also, in Russia, because of their wood construction, there were many house fires.

The house had a front porch and a root cellar which was accessed from the rear of the house. There were two bedrooms connected by a bathroom. One of the bedrooms was occupied by my mother and myself; the other by my brother who also called the house home. A living room was in front of the house and backed up by a kitchen and dining area. At the rear of the house was a summer porch which was screened in and used for storage and washing clothes. There were two large wash tubs and occasionally, when I was small, my mother would bathe me in one of them.

The house was heated by a wood burning stove in the kitchen; food was cooked on another wood burning stove also in the kitchen. The wood was stored in a metal building located on the southeast corner of the lot. . In addition, my brother tells me of the trips to the railroad tracks running on the east side of Rooshia Town and picking up coal as well as getting train crews to engage in throwing coal at boys who would throw rocks at the trains. After World War II ended, a gas burning floor furnace and gas stove was installed by my brother to replace the two wood burning stoves. Food was preserved in an ice box and ice was provided in one of two ways. One was through deliveries; the other was to visit Union Ice Company which provided ice to refrigerator cars at a railroad siding. When loading ice into the cars, sometimes blocks of ice would miss the entry to the box car and land alongside the railroad tracks, free for the taking.

Part of this story takes place at the end of the Great Depression, another part during WWII, and the latter part after the war. There were differences in personal experiences during this time. For one, thing the whole country was going through a transformation, economic and social. Many of the inhabitants of Rooshia Town were laborers who were aspiring to become part of mainstream America and move on to loftier occupations and living standards. Rooshia Town was ideally situated across Highway 99 and the Union Pacific/Southern Pacific tracks and a large industrial area that processed a substantial amount of fruits and vegetables. My brother told me of a story of how he and his friends would follow the trailers bringing raisins in from the fields and jumping on them when they slowed to cross the railroad tracks, fill their pockets with raisins, and then jump down as the trailers were unloaded. I had a similar experience in Sunnyvale where my family was working in a cannery. I was left along with other children of the cannery workers in a day care center, but we would sneak out against the rules (of course!) to follow the fruit trucks into the cannery and snatch fruit before it was unloaded. Dangerous, yes; But German Russians have thick skulls.

Regarding employment, my mother did housework and worked for a Congressman representing Fresno during the war. Regarding the war, my brother graduated from high school and joined the Navy right after Pearl Harbor. He was a fireman on a supply ship and served in the Pacific. I never suffered the negative effects of the Depression and the family through entrepreneurship and ability to partially raise their own food did not suffer. Also, during Prohibition, a lot of beer was brewed in Rooshia Town and distributed with an understanding police force. In fact, raids were staged to break up the bootlegging by the German Russians to show that the police were doing their work but the illegal booze was hidden before the raids took place. As I understand the mechanics of avoiding impounding the booze, it was hidden in a cave which could only be accessed by a small boy (in our family's case, my brother) leaving a few bottles for the police to find and show they were doing their job.

Rooshia Town changed as both the Depression and war ended. With economic opportunity growing, people left for the more prosperous areas of Fresno and better jobs. My brother returned from the war and immediately upgraded the house by installing a gas furnace and cooking stove. Also, an electric refrigerator was added. He went to work for San Joaquin Materials Supply Company in a very good job. However, he still had the dream of becoming his own boss and owning a farm. He also married Delsie Scheidt whose family also lived in Rooshia Town, she worked as a secretary at Cudahy Meat Packing Company. We all lived at 2251. But the goal was to ultimately realize my brother's dream of becoming a farmer.

My goal was to become an aeronautical engineer through my hobby and love of building model airplanes. How I ended up as a Ph.D. Agricultural Economist is another story. My oldest sister gave me a balsa wood model airplane kit when I was five years old of a Navy Hellcat and I was hooked. I set up a workshop in the summer house which had been converted to a garage and spent many hours building model planes. My other hobby was collecting comic books which I packed and carried in a suitcase. Any money I was able to acquire either went to comic books or model airplanes. I also dabbled in building model racecars which I tied to a string and made imaginary races in our dirt driveway. In those days, there was no TV and electronic games to occupy your time, you made your own amusement.

I did have playmates, but that was changing rapidly. My first boyhood friend lived across the street from me, Kenny Wagner. Kenny and I were inseparable and got into many situations which required discipline by our parents. For example, I gave Kenny a haircut which took place in his doghouse. He wanted to look like an African American. Well, I thoroughly botched the job with the result that Kenny had all his hair shaven off and picked up the dog's fleas. We also decided to build a swimming pool in his front yard which resulted in a large unsightly mudhole. However, good times don't last and Kenny and his family moved to a more prosperous part of Fresno.

Kenny was replaced by Joe Ochoa who lived about two houses down Nicholas and his cousin Eddie Fernandez. We were close playmates. However, one complication was that because their families were catholic, they attended a catholic school, San Joaquin Memorial which required them to be gone during the week. However that left the weekends and holidays and we became fast friends. In spite of having a playground which was a half block away, we mostly played in

a vacant lot next to Joe's house which also featured a huge swing hung from a branch on a very large tree. We also organized softball and kickball games in the lot. One of the things we did was to build go carts from scrap materials we salvaged from a nearby dump. We would hitch these vehicles to a bicycle and race around the streets hoping not to encounter any cars. We also built rifles from scrap wood and strips of inner tubes which we used to play cops and robbers. The inner tube strips were stretched from the tip of the gun to notches cut into the stock and then released much like a rubber band.

The playground was a half block away from our house. It covered a full block except for one corner which was occupied by Nagel's Grocery which had a limited number of grocery staples that people could purchase. Most of our shopping was done at Ohlberg's Grocery which carried a full line of groceries and also had a meat counter. Ohlberg's also produced an excellent German sausage which is still being made to this date. I also bought my comic books there when I had the money. Later Safeway moved into the area but was not on a par with Ohlberg's.

The playground had two full sized baseball fields. During the war, soldiers would come in trucks to play baseball. However, in those years we found playing in the trucks to be more amusing and entertaining than watching the games. The playground also had bathrooms with showers for those who played sports there. There were also horseshoe pits and dirt basketball courts where there was always a game going on amongst the African American kids. The key date for the playground was June 1st when the caretakers would turn on the water to fill the wading pool which all the kids in the neighborhood would jump in. Serious swimming took place at Weymouth Pool where I took lessons, and although there were lots of canals with water, it was too dangerous to go swimming in them. Although, there was drainage ditch with water in it, named "Dog Ditch", where kids would congregate and on a hot summer day was too tempting not to go swimming. I was told to stay away from "Dog Ditch" but disobeyed until one day I got caught by my sister-in-law. I never went back to swim in "Dog Ditch" again.

As far as recreation went, my brother had access to a flat bed truck at San Joaquin Materials. Occasionally, he would bring the truck home for the weekend. We would load it up with our extended family (mother, siblings, in-laws, friends, etc.), put racks around the sides for safety, and go to the San Joaquin River or Millerton Lake for an outing. There we would swim, play games, picnic, and generally relax. We really looked forward to these outings.

Our church was Evangelical Lutheran Cross Church. My mother and I would attend services every Sunday. While my mother would attend the first service which was in German, I attended Sunday School. When I finished with Sunday School, my mother and I attended the bilingual services which were given in German and English. I later attended Confirmation classes in the church when we were living on the farm in Madera and graduated. In fact, at that time I was preparing for my driver's license test by driving the car to and from Fresno. (living on a farm qualified me to get it at age 14). My siblings, two sisters and brother, were also confirmed in the same church. The minister kept trying to steer me towards divinity studies.

I attended Kirk Elementary School starting in Kindergarten and continuing through sixth grade. The only time I got into serious difficulty was one year when I grew a crop of red hot peppers and gave them out in class which caused a serious disruption. The school was half white and

half minority (African American, Mexican, and Filipino). While we had African American neighbors who treated me like a son, it was the first time I had an opportunity to become friends with the younger set although I frequently had encounters at the playground.

After Kirk, I then attended Edison Junior High School which was connected with the Senior High. I was there for one and a half years until we moved to Madera. Edison was a rough and tumble school with many fights especially at lunch hour. There was also a lot of crime. For white students, especially, one learned to stay out of troublesome situations and associate with protective groups. Even so, I enjoyed Edison but was happy to leave. In leaving, I left many African American friends who I associated with and helped to protect me from gangs at Edison. It is interesting that before I left, I was struggling with grades, but in my new Junior High School, Alexander Hamilton which was located on the other side of Fresno, my grades improved dramatically.

So, in 1950 my brother and sister-in-law found a farm through her father in Madera. We built a house and by 1952 had relocated there. I have many fond memories of my life in Rooshia Town and would not give them up. While I experienced the usual pain of a young person learning his way through life, the memories linger in a pleasurable way. The extended family that helped guide me that included my mother, siblings, sister-in-law, brother-in-laws, friends and neighbors, provided the support needed to reach the next step in moving towards adulthood. Especially memorable are the experiences that are part of my heritage and ancestry, especially now that I can more fully understand who and what a German Russian is about.