

Rohnerville--History Meets Air Age

Gold Rush Town Coming Into Own As New Era Opens

BY CHET SCHWARZKOPF
PHOTOS BY DICK RYAN

The moment you set eyes upon Rohnerville, you realize that here is another of Humboldt's and Northern California's historic towns. Pioneer type buildings still line its main street, with their false fronts and upstairs porches. And once upon a time there were many more, including four hotels, but fires in the past thirty years have taken heavy toll.

Other turns of fate also took their toll of Rohnerville. When the railroad built through, it by-passed the town. And when highway 101 followed the railroad's example, it seemed that Rohnerville's cup of adversity had overflowed. For many a year thereafter, the little town drowns amid its hills and rolling fields, seeming to live only in the past . . . a past when stagecoaches and pack trains from the mines were the town's main occupation, and a colorful cavalcade of people strode its streets and patronized its businesses.

Then came the upswing. One of history's greatest migrations poured into the west. Newcomers into Humboldt found Rohnerville a pleasant and attractive place to live. Houses began to be built again—where hardly a one had been constructed in a generation. An airport was established at Rohnerville. A fine new residential subdivision—Campton Heights—was laid out. And now, as this is written, what once had been a semi-ghost town has found its place in the sun. It is no unstable boom. The ups and downs of the lumber game haven't included Rohnerville. Rather, the town is building and growing in a conservative way. Postmistress Anna Nickols estimates its population at 550, now, and its school has doubled since 1940.

ROHNERVILLE'S HISTORY

Henry Rohner came to Humboldt in 1849—just a hundred years ago—and by 1852 had started a store in the new little settlement. As his was the pioneer establishment, and because he was active in civic affairs, the new community was named after him, and the name survived. Thus Rohnerville is one of the oldest town names in Northern California, although the place never has incorporated.

Long before its neighbor, Fortuna, had got its start, Rohnerville was an active trading center, for it was located on the road that went back to the mines in the hills, and later pushed through to San Francisco. In early days, the town had its own newspaper, the Herald. It also had a flour mill, blacksmith shops, and pack train outfitting depots, as well as a flourishing business district. Its hotels accommodated numbers of visitors, for it was an overnight stage stopover place, as well as a transfer point. From it, pack trains not only crossed over into the Sacramento valley, but pushed up into the Eel river country and eventually into Willits.

TOWN'S OLDEST RESIDENT
Charles Carr was brought to Rohnerville from New York in 1869 as a child, and has lived there ever since. An alert, pleasant-spoken man, whose appearance and interest in today's world belie his years, Mr. Carr enjoys reminiscing about the days of old, the days of gold—and is equally interested in the airplanes that make their field on his former ranch property, and in what Russia is apt to do.

"Indian troubles were about over when I got here as a kid," says Charles Carr. "And Rohnerville was coming into its heyday. The main street was a solid line of businesses then. The town didn't have a jail, and never has,

although it was a wild one in those days. As a youngster in school, I remember seeing miners come down from the hills with a poke full of gold dust. I peeked under saloon doors to watch 'em weigh out gold on the bar scales, and trade it in for spending money. What with the gambling that went on, it didn't take them long to get rid of it. They were a good-natural, decently behaved lot of men, for the most part, though.

"Those were the days when it took the paddle-wheel steamer Pelican several days to come up from San Francisco to Eureka. We got mail in once a month, or thereabout, as a rule.

"Joe and Ben Feigenbaum were big merchants in town then. They owned a slaughter house and packing plant, as well as a store and outfitting depot. Later they moved to San Francisco, and their business changed hands several times. Finally it closed up entirely as the town began to slip.

"The Humboldt County Fair used to be held in Rohnerville in the 1880's, and once upon a time we had one of the finest horse racing tracks in the state here. You can still see its outlines, if you know where to look. But Rohnerville's golden days were passing, and with that era went the fair—first to Eureka, and then to Ferndale.

"But now! Look at those nice new houses that are building. And these airplanes buzzing overhead. I'm glad I've lived to see this new day come in. I expect to see a lot of development in Rohnerville in the next few years. The turn has come."

Charlie Carr and his kindly wife live in a big house his father built in 1886, and which is located across the street from the Rohnerville airport office. Land that he farmed at one time now is used for a landing field, along with parts of the Campton and Degnan ranches.

From Charlie Carr you learn that John Brown's widow lived in Rohnerville for some years, after her husband made history and was hanged at Harper's Ferry for his part in pre-Civil War activities.

From him also you learn that the St. Joseph's Catholic college was founded in Rohnerville in 1872, on a picturesque knoll not far from the Carrs' home. The school was discontinued early in the present century, however, and the buildings were torn down some twenty years ago.

One of aviation's early pioneers also lived in Rohnerville—a man named Montgomery who used to experiment with gliders before the Wright brothers made their epochal flight at Kitty Hawk in 1903. "So," says Mr. Carr with a twinkle in his eyes, "this isn't the first time we've had 'flying machines' at Rohnerville."

NEW SUBDIVISION

Campton Heights is an area of over a hundred acres which is being divided into homesites by Mrs. Thelma E. Wood. Already some twenty new homes have been built, and more are in the planning. Most of these residences are owned by newcomers to Humboldt, who were attracted to the Rohnerville area by its balanced climate and unsurpassed view. Situated on high ground overlooking Fortuna and the Eel river valley, and with a rolling contour that merges into timbered hills, Rohnerville's new addition promises to become the town's pride and joy.

Early in the subdivision's development, it became necessary to drill another well for domestic water. Troubles had been encountered in well drilling in the past but this one, according to 16-year-old Mary Damioli, Rohnerville's "water fairy," showed unusual promise. And Mary Damioli was right, for at 315 feet, well-drilling contractor M. C. Word, of A. H. Word & Son, encountered artesian water—one of the few such wells ever drilled in Humboldt! In fact, the well turned out to be almost a gusher. It supplied far more water than was needed—as much as 500 gallons a minute, according to accounts. Now, however, it is capped over and supplies 7,000 gallons daily to an overhead tank, as needed.



View of Rohnerville Airport. Van Duzen river and Highway 101 bridge upper right

—Photo by Merle Shuster



Rohnerville business district from from hill overlooking town's center

THE TOWN'S NEW SCHOOL

In the middle of Rohnerville's older section stands a large schoolhouse which has become outmoded. The sum of \$116,000 has been set aside, according to Principal F. M. Thomas, to begin work soon on a first-class new school, to be located upon a ten-acre campus in the new Campton Heights tract. The new school is slated to be ready by the fall of 1949, and will accommodate all eight grades. It will be for Rohnerville pupils only.

Nor has Rohnerville's fine new school come a day too soon, for the present building now accommodates 156 pupils—over twice the number that were there in 1940. In fact, as recently as three years ago, Principal Thomas says, there were only 87 pupils, and last year there were 143. Six teachers are now on the faculty, including a special music instructor.

Principal Thomas of the Rohnerville school is an ambitious and competent educator, who has the advantage of having been born and reared in Rohnerville. Deeply interested in his profession, Mr. Thomas anticipates with pleasure the move into the new building next fall.

"Frankly, I don't know exactly how old this present structure is," he said. "But we have records here that date back to 1863, although this building is not that old, of course."

He spread out an aged document written in the fine Spencerian handwriting of pre-type-writer days. "If you want to see a roster of well known Humboldt names, look at this."

And there they were . . . many names that are still well known in Humboldt as succeeding generations have carried on.

THE NEW AIRPORT

Rohnerville's airport is a good one, and it soon will be better. For federal and county funds have been earmarked for the laying out of a new runway this spring. The present one is a grass strip 3100 feet long, according to Paul La Prelle at the field. The new runway will be a paved job 150 feet wide by 4000 feet in length, and it has been approved by the CAA, according to La Prelle.

The airport is located on high ground, southeast of Campton Heights, and handy to it. At present, twenty-six planes are located there permanently. "It has grown from practically nothing to a quite respectable field in two years," Paul La Prelle states with justifiable pride. "What it will be when the new runway is done is a matter for one's imagination. Tourists, business men, sportsmen—in fact, the rapidly growing air-minded public—assure the field of an almost indefinite growth. And our climatic conditions here

are the best—minimum wind and fog, year 'round accessibility. You can't blame a person for feeling enthusiastic, for the air age has just begun. Some day this field will give more back to Rohnerville than the railroad and highway took from it when they passed it by, years ago. And it won't be too long in coming, either."

ROHNERVILLE ON THE WAY

As you look across the gently rolling and scenic countryside that comprises the Rohnerville area—with the eternal hills for a background—you must share the enthusiasm of men like La Prelle, Principal Thomas, and old-timer Charlie Carr who has seen more than the rest. And likewise, you must share the enthusiasm of Mrs. Wood who is doing such a fine job with Campton Heights.

For Rohnerville is slated to come into its own, and you can envision the day when the countryside between it and Fortuna will be a



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solidly built community. The day and women foresee, and what their is coming, they'll tell you, when will power says shall be done. The sun shines bright upon Rohnerville as its second century of life offer—plus what the minds of men begins.



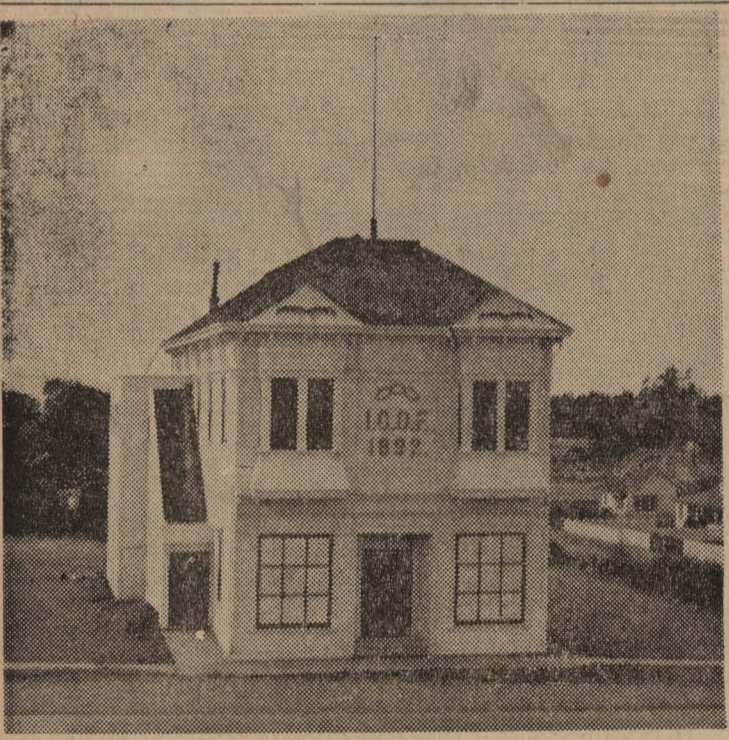
One of Rohnerville's historic homes



The New Era is building ever ahead



Pioneer resident Charles Carr at home



Most early day towns had an I.O.O.F. hall



Leftovers from stage coach days, complete with balconies