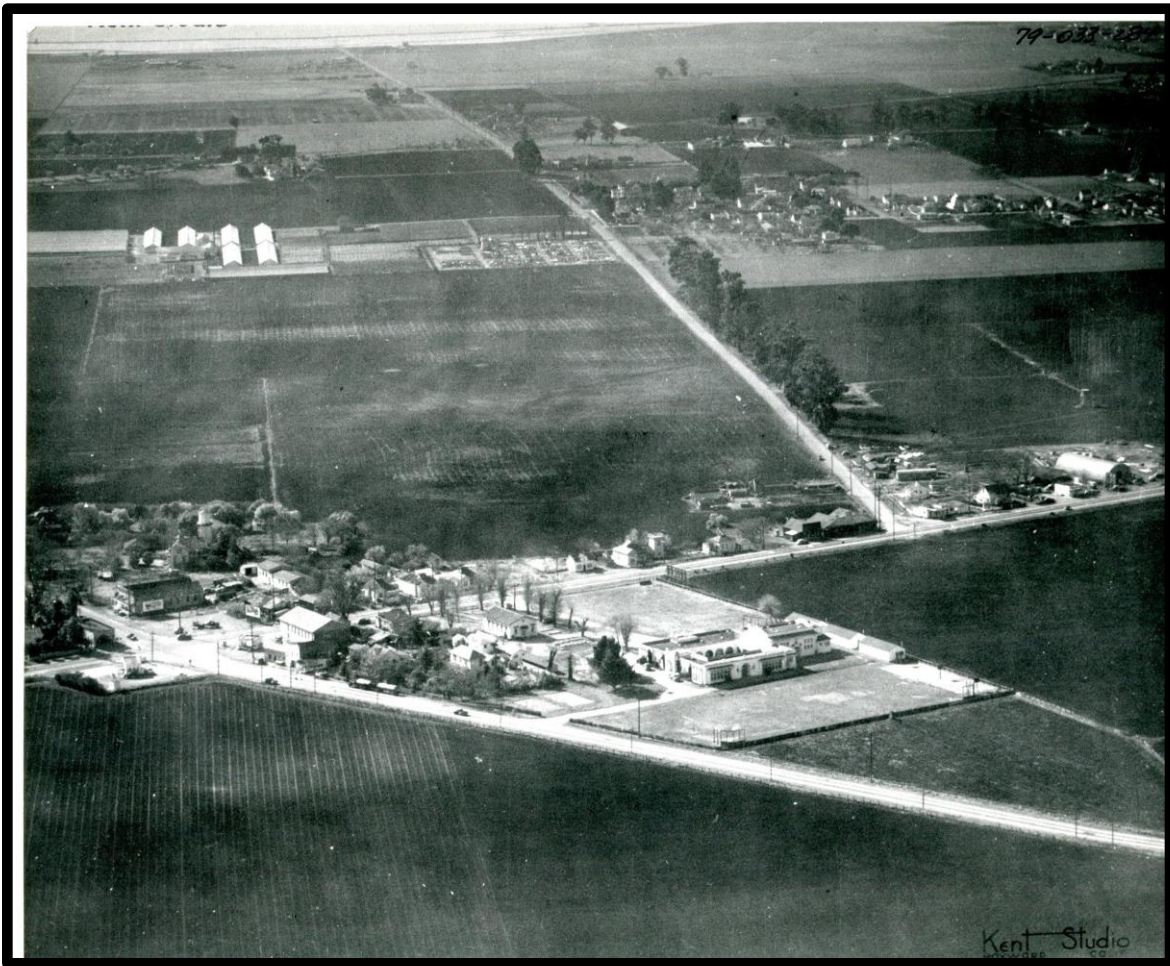


The Story of Mount Eden

In the general area of present day Hesperian Boulevard and Highway 92 there once was a small village known as Mount Eden. While the physical town no longer exists the name is still used to identify this part of our community. Over the years, residents of this area have clung with pride to their community identity; including making sure that it had its own zip code. Today, Mount Eden has been completely absorbed by the City of Hayward.



*An aerial view of Hesperian Boulevard and Depot Road, c. 1948
(HAHS Collection)*

Where the name "Mount Eden" came from is still unknown. There is speculation that early settlers to the area noticed a rise in the topography here from the flat plain that surrounded it and called it "Mount" for that reason. Another theory is that Eden Landing was founded by Mount Eden Company which was made up of farmers from Mount Eden, Illinois. Another source credits a Gus Eden from Kentucky and an early settler as its namesake. Wherever the name came from, what has always been known about the area is that it was a prime location for farming. It was in a sense like a Garden of Eden where almost anything could grow.

The first European settlers arrived in the area in 1852. In the early days, the area was predominantly settled by a large number of families of German and Danish descent. So much so, that Mount Eden was sometimes referred to as "Germantown" or "Little Denmark." A walk through the Mount Eden Cemetery confirms this with such names on the gravestones as Pestdorf, Petermann, Mohr, Eichler, Jensen, Clawiter, Harder, Hess, and Schaefer, just to name a few. They purchased land from Barbara Soto, Guillermo Castro's sister, who owned the land granted to her husband by the Mexican government in the 1840s.

Many of the German and Danish immigrants to the area came to escape the efforts to unify Germany under German Chancellor Bismarck. The revolution seeking to establish personal liberty failed and many liberals emigrated to escape imprisonment. Compulsory service in the Prussian military for men in all German provinces, including the Danish province of Schleswig-Holstein annexed in 1863, also led people to leave their homeland. When they arrived in the Mount Eden area, most of them engaged in farming on substantial farms that grew up around the town center on Telegraph Road (now Hesperian Boulevard) and Depot Road. Farm crops included many different types of fruits and vegetables as well as grains. Some of the land was set aside for grazing of cattle, sheep and pigs.

In the town center, John Shiman erected the first homes and a store. Edward Clawiter, who had been to the area several times from Germany, brought his bride Mary Gading and opened a mercantile store. In 1854, Cornelius Mohr worked on a grain threshing crew until he could save enough money to purchase 440 acres of land. He built the family homestead on that land. It still stands today to the north of Chabot College and is still inhabited by his descendants. Eric Ruus arrived in the late 1880s. He built and operated the Mount Eden Danish Hotel which became a favorite meeting place for Danish families.



Mt. Eden Store c. 1885 (HAHS Collection)

In 1853 John Johnson started the manufacture of salt on the marshes next to the bay. In 1854, he shipped his first 25 tons to San Francisco in a scow especially designed for the shallow waters of the East Bay landings. Eventually, annual shipments amounted to over 2,000 tons. In 1875, Andrew Oliver purchased Mr. Johnson's ponds and developed an additional 42 acres of salt ponds that were in operation well into the mid 20th century.



John Johnson, Mt. Eden Pioneer (HAHS Collection)

In 1883, Henry Petersen Jr. built The Wigwam at the corner of Telegraph Road and Depot Road. With its stage and capacity for 400 people it served as the community center for Mount Eden. Many political meetings throughout the years were held here. It was designed after the convention hall in Chicago where Abraham Lincoln was nominated for President in 1860 and named after the Tammany Hall Wigwam in New York. This building stood for 65 years before it was demolished in 1961 to make way for Highway 92.

In the early 20th century there was another wave of immigration. This time it was people from Japan. Many of them immigrated because of the great opportunities in America. Some of them settled in the Mount Eden area, continuing in the farming tradition, as sharecroppers on the American farms since they could not initially buy the land or equipment. In 1898 Zenjuro Shibata arrived in the Bay Area and after saving his hard-earned salary from various odd jobs, purchased three acres in Oakland to raise flowers. With the success of his business, he needed more land. In 1920 he built his first greenhouses on 26 acres in Mount

Eden to grow roses and carnations. The Mount Eden Nursery was born and it would soon become nationally known in floricultural circles. Other nurseries sprang up across the Southern Alameda area.



Mt. Eden's Japanese Language School, c.1934. It was located at Depot Road and Hesperian Boulevard. (HAHS Collection)

By the time World War II broke out the flower industry in and around Mount Eden was a highly profitable business. Greenhouses covered millions of square feet. With the incarceration of Japanese-Americans during World War II, including the Shibatas, who were interred at Tule Lake, many of the area nurseries fell into neglect and disrepair. The Shibatas were fortunate when they found William Zappettini, an Italian immigrant, to lease and care for the nursery until they

returned in 1945. Luckily once the war was over, many, but not all, of the area nurseries recovered. Roses, gardenias, carnations, junipers, gladiolus and irises were once again sold all around the world. This lasted into the early 1980s for many nurseries until the rise of housing developments became the final death knell for them. With the influx of new residents, land became increasingly valuable and was bought up by developers for tracts of homes and new industries.

Today, as you drive around the Mount Eden area you can see vestiges of its life as a separate community. Some of the older family homes still stand, the old post office still sits at the corner of Hesperian and Highway 92, the salt ponds on the edge of the bay are there with pieces of old harvesting equipment weathering in the bay air, there is still a separate zip code, 94557 and for long time residents, there is still a strong sense of community.



Mt. Eden Post Office (HAHS Collection)