Current Headlines in Evergreen

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Paths to Evergreen

The Women of Evergreen

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Isolated by language, cultural differences and miles of dirt roads between ranches in the growing city of San Jose, each family traveling to Evergreen from the 1850s became self-sufficient.

As the settlers selected their Evergreen home sites, they built small temporary shelters near the creeks or springs. Heavy limbs of the many oak trees shaded the new arrivals as they unloaded their wagons.

While unpacking the wagons, they carefully sorted out the few precious possessions they had so carefully packed for this long journey, including corsets, high button shoes, aprons, sun bonnets, carpet beaters, washer boards, buckets, wash tubs, family albums, Bibles, books, plows, hoes, shovels, suspenders, garters, butter churns, spinning wheels, needle and thread, pots and pans, rocking chairs, irons, dishes, quilts, rag rugs, candle wax, brooms and more.

Essential herbs

Along with the few bare essentials that filled the wagons, many of the homemakers tucked in treasured packages of herb seeds and one or two cuttings of their favorite geranium or rose. While the men cleared the land and planted their crops, the homemakers kept busy organizing their gardens. A "frontier woman" played the roll of mother, teacher and healer. As the homemaker, her garden herbs would be used for various purposes. Pictured are the daughters of the Orval family.

For most of the women in those distant days, life without herbs would have been unthinkable. Any medical advice or a doctor's visit could take days. The cures and potions passed on by "Granny" helped protect and cure family ailments.

One doctor served the entire Santa Clara Valley. Dr. Benjamin Cory (1822-96) left his home in Ohio and traveled by ox cart to San Francisco. Finding the city overrun by "gold field" doctors, he settled in San Jose and became one of the first and only doctors serving this area.

Often referred to as the "Singing Doctor" he rode miles of lonely dirt roads, attending to his patients and entertaining himself with his songs. It was said that when he stopped for the night, he would lay a rope in a circle hopefully to keep the snakes from crawling under his bed-roll.

A "frontier woman" played the roll of mother, teacher and healer. As the homemaker, her garden herbs would be used for various purposes. Around the house they kept fleas, flies, mosquitoes and lice at bay. Herbs were used to fumigate sickrooms, perfume rooms for special occasions, sweeten linen closets and repel moths. They were also added to cosmetics, mouthwashes, shampoo, soaps, talc water and pomanders. Herbs were used to make washing powders, dye clothes and scour brass and pewter pans.
In the days before refrigeration, herbs were used to preserve meat and fish, to add flavor to a bland and monotonous diet, and to spice the winter stew pot.

Healing the sick
But it was in the sick room that herbs really came into their own, where they were used for every ailment—from a minor scratch to a threatened miscarriage. With the wisdom passed down by generations before them, the women concocted teas made from mint, parsley, sage and rose hips.

A few of the tonics administered to ease the family discomforts included elder blossom flowers as a cold remedy, chamomile as a bed time sedative and cinnamon as an aid for diarrhea. I lived with two grandmothers who would use a lot of brown paper, vinegar, peppermint and their own tonics to cure and care for the family.

Settlement in Evergreen had extended in all directions with small barns and wood frame houses along the creeks on both the east and west sides of the valley. Agricultural practices during the first ten years changed the valley floor from oak forest to productive wheat and grain fields and vineyards with family orchards around their homes.

Slowly the Village of Evergreen began to emerge. A growing settlement along San Felipe Road crossed by Aborn would soon become the community center. The elusive hopes of the early pioneers would become reality. Now the community of Evergreen not only could dream of the promise of the West, but they could enjoy the rewards.

The next Paths to Evergreen Column will focus on the Village of Evergreen.

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