

Driving through history: Sunnyvale's roots are traced through its street signs

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Life in Sunnyvale in the 1800s was a rich one. Grapes, figs, pears and grain grew heartily, while cattle and sheep grazed along vast pastures. Spanish explorers named the area "la pastoria de las borregas," or lambs' pasture.

Looking at the city today, it's hard to imagine a time when the streets were unpaved and the town had more trees than buildings.

Many may not realize it despite driving on local streets every day, but street signs serve as reminders of the town's rich history. From Pastoria and Borregas avenues to the nearly dozen of Sunnyvale pioneer Martin Murphy Jr.'s family members, the city's history is posted on nearly every corner.

There is no reason on why any particular theme was selected, but the city's 13 planning areas each have their own motif.

The city is divided into areas, and each area has two naming themes--one for north/south streets and another for east/west streets.

Alberta Avenue and Quebec Court are just a few in the Canadian/Pacific Northwest-themed corner of the city, which is situated between Homestead Road and Fremont Avenue, west of Sunnyvale Saratoga Road.

The planning area bounded by Fremont Avenue, Homestead Road, Lawrence Expressway and Sunnyvale Saratoga Road features names of English, Scottish or Irish towns for streets that run east and west.

For streets in the area that run north and south, most are named after birds.

Another theme includes fruits, which were once more prevalent than people. Others feature artists and composers, flowers and trees, bodies of water, the solar system and stars, California places, Spanish saints, Southwest cities, Spanish ranchos and California pioneers.

"It seems that Sunnyvale has always been rather conservative when naming streets," according to Sunnyvale Heritage Park Museum collections manager Jeanine Stanek. "Most that I have found are for families' first or last names."

The most prevalent name in Sunnyvale, of course, is Murphy, representing the prolific family that made up a third of the first emigrant train to cross the Sierra Nevada.

Murphy Avenue was one of the first streets in Sunnyvale. Founders of the area's farm industry, the Murphys were the largest landowners in California. Murphy Station, land donated by the Murphys, was a stop on the Southern Pacific Railroad and eventually became Sunnyvale in 1912.

Elizabeth Way and Taaffe Street were named after Elizabeth Yuba Murphy Taaffe, the first child of American emigrants born in California, according to the Heritage Park Museum.

The Murphys gave Elizabeth and her husband, William Post Taaffe, a wedding gift of 2,800 acres in the Los Altos Hills.

The couple built their homes on the site that is now Foothill College. Mathilda Avenue is named after the daughter of Elizabeth and William.

Mary Avenue traces back to Mary Ann Murphy Carroll, another daughter of Martin Murphy Jr. Her husband was Richard T. Carroll,

who had an import-export business in San Francisco. Helen Murphy Arques was their youngest daughter, hence Arques Avenue.

Other influential pioneers inspired the naming of Hollenbeck and Crossman avenues. Crossman Avenue got its name from Walter E. Crossman, the first land developer in Sunnyvale.

The fedora-wearing, cigar-smoking Crossman was known as an opportunist, according to historian Mary Jo Ignoffo. He bought 200 acres from Murphy Jr. and gave land to build the town's first churches.

He acted as a real estate agent, notary public, and later was the president of the Chamber of Commerce.

He was the one to dub Sunnyvale the "City of Destiny" in an attempt to attract more buyers of land.

Hollenbeck Road was named after William Stover Hollenbeck.

After coming to California to participate in the Gold Rush, he planted one of the first commercial orchards in the Santa Clara Valley.

Though these founding members of Sunnyvale had their names live on through the city's history, some weren't as fortunate. Of the thousands of street names that stretch across about 23 square miles of the city, a handful of street names have not stood the test of time.

Hollenbeck's daughter, Elsie, married George Briggs, who had bought land near Hollenbeck in Sunnyvale. At one time there were two streets named after Briggs: Briggs Avenue in downtown is now Aries Way and Briggs Road off Fremont Avenue once bordered George and Elsie Briggs' large orchard farm, but was renamed Pome Avenue.

Another street named Battleford Drive was changed to Barton Drive after a woman complained that she didn't like its warlike association.

However, it is not very often that the city has to step in and change a street name already in place. Former planning director Arthur Spencer even referenced Shakespeare in the 1960s, when he asked the planning commission, "What's in a name? A rose by any other name would smell just as sweet."

He concluded that whatever a street sign is named, once residents move to Sunnyvale no changes are necessary.

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