

COLFAX COBBLESTONES

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Colfax, California, in the 1920s

In addition to photographs, books, and local artifacts, the CAHS Archive also contains oral histories and interviews. During 1986–1988, John Alfred Rambottini recorded two interviews and an oral history about living in Colfax during the 1920s. Mr. Rambottini, who was born in 1902, came to

Colfax in 1920, and worked at various jobs, including the local TB sanatoriums. In the following pages, we are printing Verne D. Wilt's article based on interviews with Mr. Rambottini and Mr. Rambottini's oral history about Colfax in the 1920s.



The Colony, on Colony Lane Road, Colfax, California, 1922. The Cottage Colony was a group of 31 cottages for TB patients that was operated in conjunction with the nearby Colfax Hospital for the Tuberculous. Doctor Robert A. Peers was the Medical Director. From the Bowers-Keck Collection of the CAHS.

Interview with John Alfred Rambottini

Note: The following article was based on oral interviews with John Alfred Rambottini. Because the interviews were transcribed from recordings, there is some uncertainty about the correct spelling of some names.

By Verne D. Wilt | September 9, 1988

Mr. John Rambottini first came to Colfax in 1920 and was employed by Dr. Robert A. Peers at the Colfax Hospital. John provided general transportation and delivery service for the hospital for just two weeks. Dr. Peers wished John to live on the hospital grounds; John declined to do so.

He then was employed by James Scarborough at the Colfax Trading Company for two to three months.

John worked until the late spring of 1923 at Fruge and Tiffarough's [or Tiffereau's] Colfax Garage as a mechanic. John left Colfax for Tacoma, Washington, and later Santa Rosa, California. He returned to Colfax and employment at the Colony in 1924.

John worked at the Colony until October of 1926, a period of approximately two years. He did all the shopping and laundry delivery, banking, postal pick-up, Colfax Drug store prescription delivery and acted as taxi and school bus service for the Colony people. His was a utility wagon service called the "Candy Wagon."

People charged their groceries at the local market. However, the drug store prescriptions had to be paid for at purchase time, so John was paid a small fee by the druggist for this service.

He used a one-ton Ford Model "T" truck with side curtains for general delivery and freight. He had the use of a Chalmers automobile for passengers and school children transportation.

John's salary was \$35.00 per month including room and board, with his laundry, and he had use of the vehicles.

What was the Colony?

The Cottage Colony of the Colfax School for the Tuberculous was a group of 31 cottages for TB patients who were accompanied by their own attendants. Patients who were unable to bring their own attendants lived in the nearby Colfax Hospital for the Tuberculous, which was operated in conjunction with the Colony. Doctor Robert A. Peers was the Medical Director.

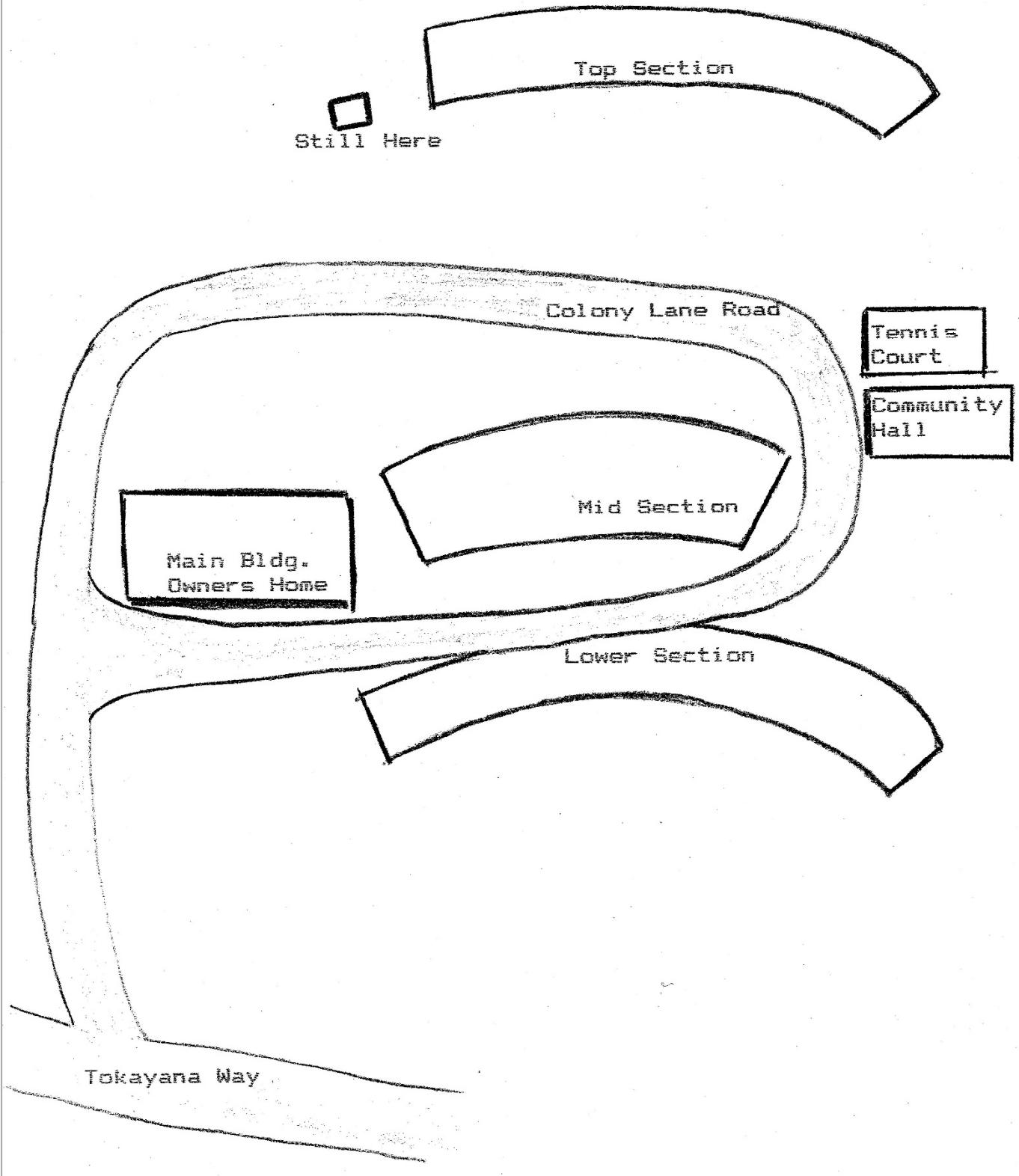
The Colony was located at the end of Colony Lane off Tokayana Way. There were thirty-one cottages, an impressive owners' home, a workshop, and a large Community Building for cards, checkers, and movies one or two times a month. The Community Building was just one large room, no fireplace, but it did have bathroom facilities. No other convalescent home, hospital, or sanatorium was ever called or referred to as the Colony.

The cottages were frame with shingle roofs on tall (4 ft.) foundation piers of wood with no skirting. They were one bedroom, kitchen, living-utility room, and bathroom. Heat and cooking was by wood stove which had coils to heat the water. They had running water and electricity. There was no window glass, just screens and roll up canvas flaps to cover the openings. Each kitchen had an ice box but no refrigerator. Floors were wood, with linoleum in the kitchen and bathrooms.

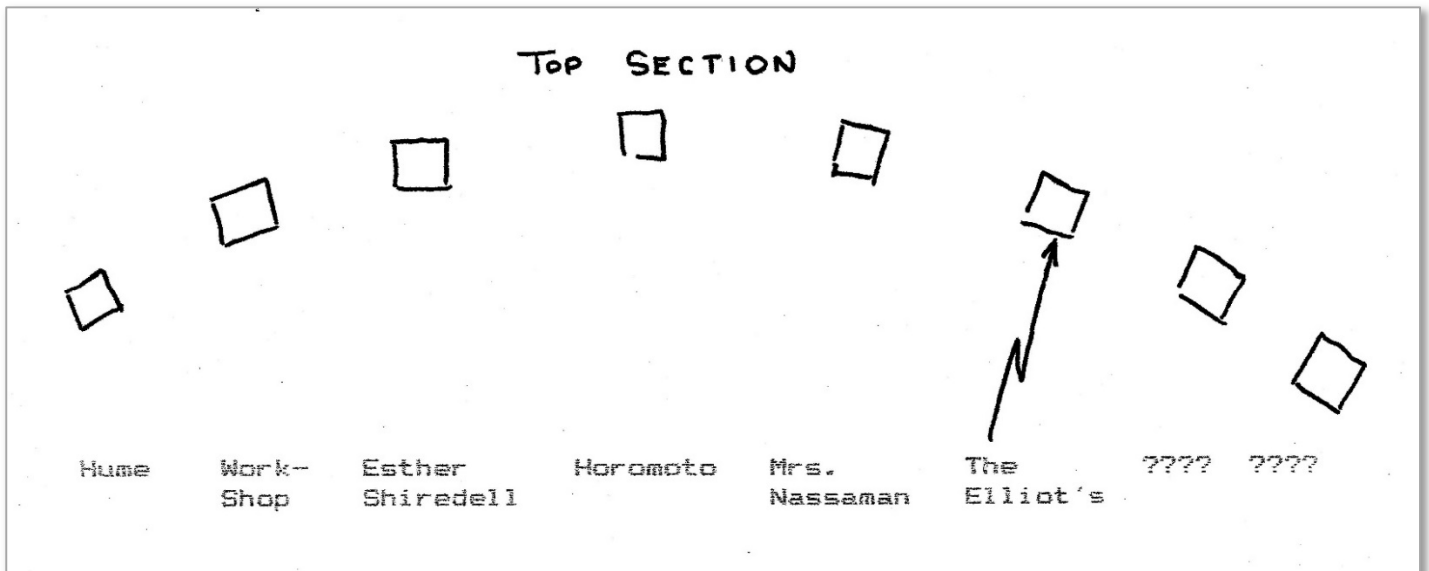
The Colony was always fully occupied, and there was a long waiting list.

The main building was the owners' home where John had his room. There were six to eight employees including the operators, Frank and Eva Roscelli. Besides Mrs. Roscelli, Mrs. Canolish and Mrs. Airola helped with the cooking chores since two of the cottages were for convalescing patients that required full time care. Their meals were served on tray or, if the patients were able, they went to the kitchen to eat.

APPROXIMATE LAYOUT OF THE COLONY



A diagram of the Cottage Colony of the Colfax School for the Tuberculous, Colfax, California, in the 1920s. The area labeled "Top Section" is shown in more detail on the following page. The text of this drawing was done with a dot-matrix printer in the 1980s, with the roads and buildings drawn by hand.



A diagram of the buildings shown in the “Top Section” of the Colony diagram on the previous page. The text of this drawing was done with a dot-matrix printer in the 1980s, with the buildings drawn by hand.

There were two handymen, Nate Klinkenbeard and his brother Bill. They did all maintenance and up-keep and plumbing repair.

A doctor was on the premises during the day: Dr. Pierce, a single gentleman, and later Dr. Donnivitz, who was married with one daughter. They lived in a separate house on the hill adjacent to the Colony. Dr. Peers was the head physician in charge of the patients.

People of note living at the Colony were “Miss Woods,” a prima donna actress who had a

housekeeper named Mrs. Shepard. She was visited on several occasions by the famous director Adolph Zucker. Also, Mrs. Nausman, a writer, and a priest, Father Vaughn, who had TB and lived in cottage #28.

A writer, Mr. Elliot, Esq., his wife and daughter lived at the Colony all during Mr. Rambottini’s employment. Mr. Elliot was from the Bay Area, tall and well built, of light complexion, a very quiet person, and approximately 45 years of age. The Elliott cottage was located in the “Top Section” of the Colony.

How to contact us

There are four ways to contact us.

- Call: (530) 346-8599
- Email: museum.colfax@gmail.com
- Letter: PO Box 185, Colfax, CA 95713.
- Museum: The Colfax Heritage Museum is currently open Tuesday, Thursday, Friday, and Saturday, 9 a.m.–2 p.m.

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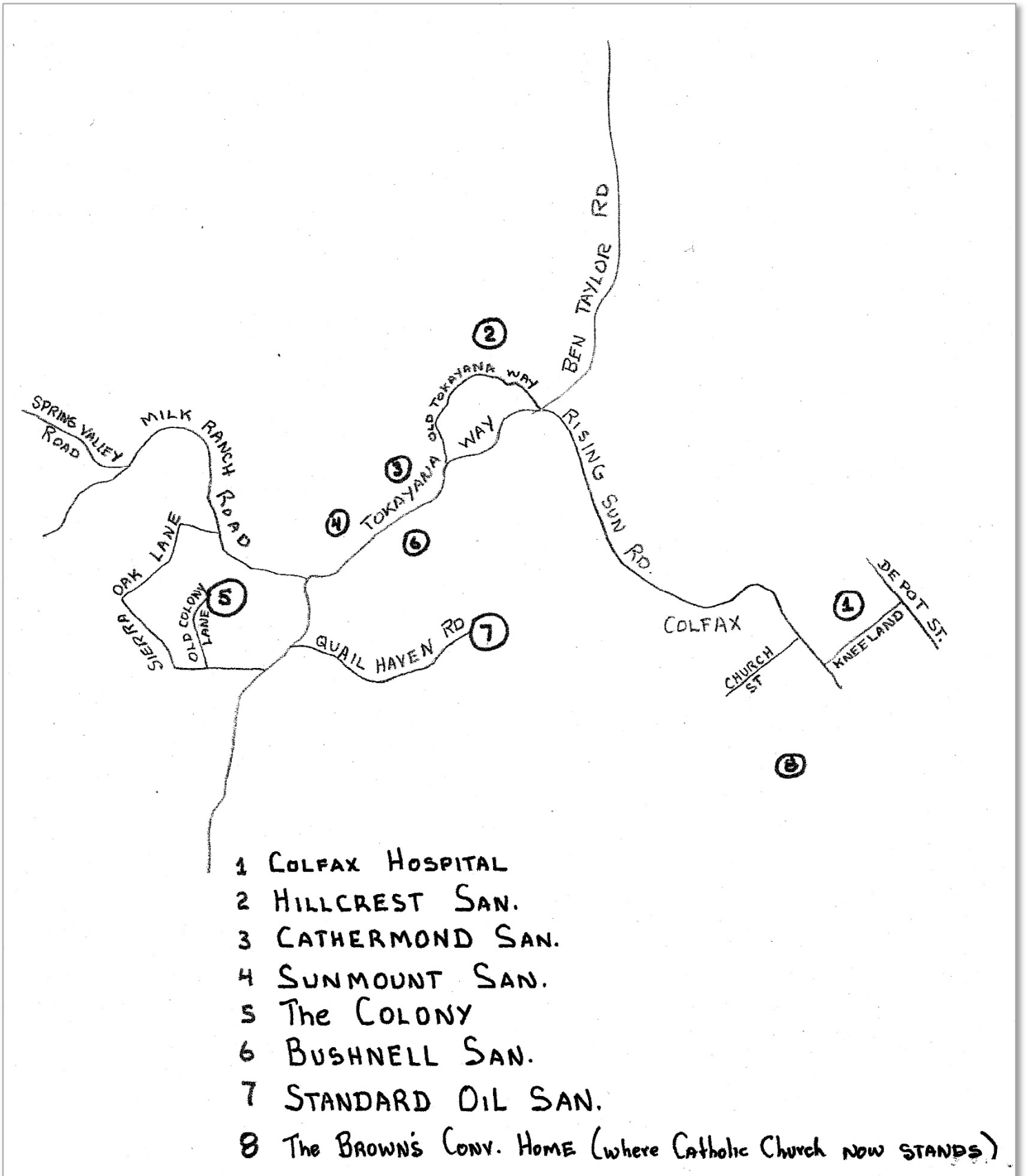
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Locations of TB hospitals, sanatoriums, and convalescent homes in Colfax, California, in the 1920s. This map was created in the 1980s.

A walk through Colfax, California, in the early 1920s, part 1

*Note: The following personal account was recorded by John Alfred Rambottini in **February 1987**. Mr. Rambottini was 85 years old when he recorded this. Because this history was transcribed from a recording, there is some uncertainty about the correct spelling of some names and the Italian phrases that Mr. Rambottini used.*

My name is John Rambottini, and I will take you folks back to the year of 1922. It was early in the Fall. I was still at the Colfax Garage with Fruge and Tiffarough's [or Tiffereau's], but I had moved from the room over at the garage. My father and I had rented a cottage at the east end of Colfax overlooking the S.P. [Southern Pacific] tracks. At the same time, we could look down and see the narrow-gauge railroad track. We could see the train chugging up the mountain.

In those days, when we had slack at the garage, we'd always get time off. We would trade days.

Now, I'll transfer you in on one of my days off.

In the morning I would get up, eat my breakfast, and sit out on the porch and wait for the little noise I would expect to hear coming up the track, a little narrow-gauge railroad. You could hear the whistle about a mile away.

When they blew the whistle you could hear the echo bounce back and forth through the canyon as the train made its way up between the pine trees and sharp curves.

I would have my breakfast, sit out on the porch with my cup of coffee,

wait for that noise. I'd hear that sound, I'd walk leisurely down the track, and wait for the train.

Pretty soon you would see it coming up the grade, steam coming out all of the loose joints. It was chugging laboriously up the grade and its wheezing, sounded like a three-legged mule with asthma.

Well, I'd stand there and wait for the little train. See old Bill Mutton, at the throttle, sticking his head out the window. He was almost as big as the engine itself. I would just stand there and wait and see it coming up the grade.

I'd wait for it, and by the time the last of the three-car train reached the point where I was standing, the train would speed up a little bit as the track would level off and straighten out. I would stand and watch the little train go down the track. You'd never see two cars in line. There was always one weaving one way and one the other.

I often wondered how it stayed on the track. I sat and watched. They reached the Southern Pacific station, old Bill Mutton putting the air on the brakes. Poor little engine would come to a shuddering, shivering stop, and it would seem to relax as he would say, "Well, Bill, we made it again."

Well, I would stand there a moment and then I'd shake my head, gather my thoughts together, and wander on leisurely across the railroad tracks.

There was a feed store there at the time, where the marine works are.

I'd always see Emmet Marten or old man Hutchinson. He was Jean Paoli's grandfather. They were very pleasant people, both of them, very soft spoken. They had a pleasant word all of the time. So then I would speak a few words.

I'd walk up to the road, which was then the main highway through town. Boy, you had to watch your step across that highway. Sometimes there was at least ten cars a day go through there. Anyway, I made it across the highway, and I knew what I was going to see when I got across the road.

There was old Charley Geisendorfer. He was our supervisor for our 4th district. He'd be out in the yard, clip a bush here and clip a bush there, with a shear in his hand. I'd say, "Well, good morning, Charley." He would never answer back. He would walk off grumbling all by himself. I'd walk down the street with a grin on my face, and never say a word anymore.

I'd take my time until I got down to the corner. There I would see Mrs. Williams, Minnie Williams. She was a beautiful, little old lady. She was straight as a string, never had a wrinkle in her face. Her eyes were darker than night, and her hair was white as snow. She always had a smile on her face. Minnie was a pleasant little lady. We'd just have a word or two.

Then, I'd wander down to the corner, turn the corner, into the blacksmith's shop. There I would see old Shorty Barret. His name was Patty Barret. People called him

Shorty. I stepped in the door and say, "Good morning, Shorty."

He would say, "That it is, that it is!" and go on pounding on the piece of iron, hit the iron a couple of licks and then hit the anvil, bounce the hammer on the anvil. Then hit the iron another lick or two, bounce the hammer over the anvil.

I'd say, "Well, I'll see you later, Shorty."

Then he would say, "Aye," and go on beating the iron. I'd walk across the street to McCleary's garage, step into the office.

"Good morning, Mrs. McCleary."

She says, "Good morning, John. Wait a minute, you're just the man we're looking for."

I says, "Now, what did I do?"

She says, "Oh, nothing. John wants to see you."

"O.K." So, I'd wait.

She says, "I'll call him." So, she steps out of the office and calls John McCleary.

John comes out and he says, "Hi, John. How are you?"

I say, "Oh, pretty good."

He says, "You working tomorrow?"

"As far as I'm concerned, no, I don't think so."

He says, "Well, you have a truck load, going up to the mountains or a Model-T overhaul job?"

Whichever it was, I'd say, "Yes, I can do it for you John. I'll see you in the morning at eight o'clock."

So, I'd step around the corner there to Auburn Lumber Co., old S. K. Williams.

There was another one of the sore heads of Colfax. We had about four of them in town. I'd say, "Good morning, S. K."

He'd say, "What the hell's good about it?"

"Well, stop and think, S. K. You can see me, can't you?"

"Yap."

"Well, you can hear the train whistle, can't you?"

"Yup. Well, what's that got to do with it?"

"You could walk up and down these steps and cuss the people that go by."

He'd say, "Yes, I'll give it some thought. I never thought of it that way."

I say, "Think about it."

He said, "My gosh, I think I will." But the next time it was the same thing as always with S. K. Everybody called him S. K. He was S. K. Williams.

Then, I'd make my way down to the corner, which was then the Colfax Bakery. There was Theresa Stagi. She'd always be out there either sweeping the sidewalk or hosing it off with a hose.

"Well, good morning. Theresa."

She says, "Good morning."

"Why are you out so early in the morning?"

She says, "Well, there's a lot to do around here."

I'd say, "Yes, that's for sure," and I'd go on up the street. Next door was the shoemaker shop. I'd say, "Hey, Shoemaker!"

All he could say was "A-La." That meant, "Hey, there." So, I'd walk on by.

I'd cross the street over to mountain view. There was old Ralph, always. You'd always see him out there, old Ralph Bertolucci.

I'd say, "Good morning, Ralph. It's pretty cold this morning. What's the good news? Rain or snow?"

He'd look up in the air and say, "Well, who knows. It does what it pleases, anyway."

I say, "That's for sure."

I'd keep going. Next door, there was Tony Perry's number two vegetable and fruit stand. That was always taken care of by a lady, by the name of Favilla, Mrs. Favilla.

I'd say, "Good morning Mrs. Favilla."

She'd say it in Italian, "Bon giorno, Giovanni! Good morning, Johnny."

Then I'd continue on.

Next door there would be Dan Russell's meat market. I'd say, "Oh, hi there, Mr. Russell."

He'd let out a grunt or two and that's about it. I could look to the window and see old Dave Bauer. He was the meat cutter. He always had time to wave good morning or goodbye, or whatever it was.

He was busy cutting meat for the display in the window and the showcase. He was so short he couldn't see over the top of the showcase. Then, I'd continue down.

Next door was J.M. Scarborough. I am going to pause here a minute and tell you about J. M. He was my employer at one time. You'd always see him either chasing the dog down the street with the broom or he had a bucket of water and a broom washing off the doors where the dog had stopped a moment before.

I'd say, "Hey, J. M. Do you think you'll ever catch up with that dog?"

He says, "One of these days, I will."

I told him, "Yes, and one of these days you might be sorry too." So, then I'd continue on down.

The next door would be Big Bill's saloon. They called him Big Bill, Bill Belwameni. That's the town he came from in Italy. He was a good-natured, big guy, about six foot, two inches, raw-boned, and the saloon keeper. You know what he would say in Italian, "Look who's coming." Then, he'd say, "Guarda chi si Trova? Cheappa una branchata di pinatsa. Grab a handful of peanuts." Well, then I'd thank him. He had a whole big sack full by the door for people, but they mostly helped themselves. Then I'd go on down to the next door.

There was a dry goods store there and a shoe stand. Run by old man Rugani. He's a short, red-faced guy, think he was going to have a heart attack any moment, such a red face. I'd say, "Good morning, Rugani."

He'd say, "Good morning."

"When you going back to Italy?"

Well, he'd say, "Two more months." And sure enough, in two months he sold out to Petri. Then, he left and went to Italy.

Next door would be the drugstore, Jack Butler. Johnny Butler was his name, they called him Jack. He was a druggist. He never had much to say. He'd always look out the window, "Huh." He'd let out a grunt or two and go on about his work.

Next to the drugstore, you would find the Bank of America which was then the Bank of Italy. Art Weaver was always at the window. You could always see him there, busy. He had time to wave "hi" or "good morning" or "bye." He was another quiet fellow.

Next door there was a stairway that led upstairs to the Odd Fellows Hall and to the Masonic Hall. I never had any reason to go up there, so I didn't know what was up there.

The next door to that was old man Spooler. He was a German. I'd always say, "Good morning, Mr. Spooler."

He'd always say, "That it is. That it is. Good morning." He had a daughter, a redheaded-daughter, freckle-faced, who turned out to be a schoolteacher.

Then on down would be Joe Worrays saloon. Sometimes Joe would be in the front, sometimes he wouldn't. If he was in front, I would speak to him and keep going.

Then we came to Heiney Lobner. He'd stand out front. That old Kuensly was running the store.

I said, "Good morning, Heiney."

"Oh, hi, mechanic," he'd say. "How are you this morning?"

"Oh, just fine," I'd say. Just a few words and then continue.

Next door was George West's grocery store. You could always see George West in the little cubical out in the middle of the floor, all glass around. He could watch everybody as they were doing their work.

Poor old Walter Viscia. I felt sorry for him. They'd have him out front trying to crank that old two-cylinder high wheel, hard tire rig. Try and get it started to go on his delivery route. I think Eddie Viscia has that same old truck. You can see it in the Fourth of July Parade almost every year.

"Well, Walt, do you think that you'll every get it going?"

He says, "Oh, if I crank it long enough I'll get it wound up so that it will run anyway."

Pretty soon he'd get it started and shiver, shake, jump in the seat, get in gear, and take off down the road to the delivery route.

Then I'd cross the street. That was once Big Foot Murphy's Saloon on the corner that had been turned into a soda fountain.

I'd stand there and pause a minute, just think of the old times, when old Murphy was there, and collect my thoughts.

The second part of John Rambottini's walk through 1920s' Colfax will be printed in the March 2022 edition of the Colfax Cobblestones newsletter.

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The Colfax Area Historical Society (CAHS) and the Colfax Heritage Museum (CHM) appreciate the support and services that local businesses provide.

The following local businesses and organizations are members of the CAHS, and we appreciate their support. We ask you to support them.

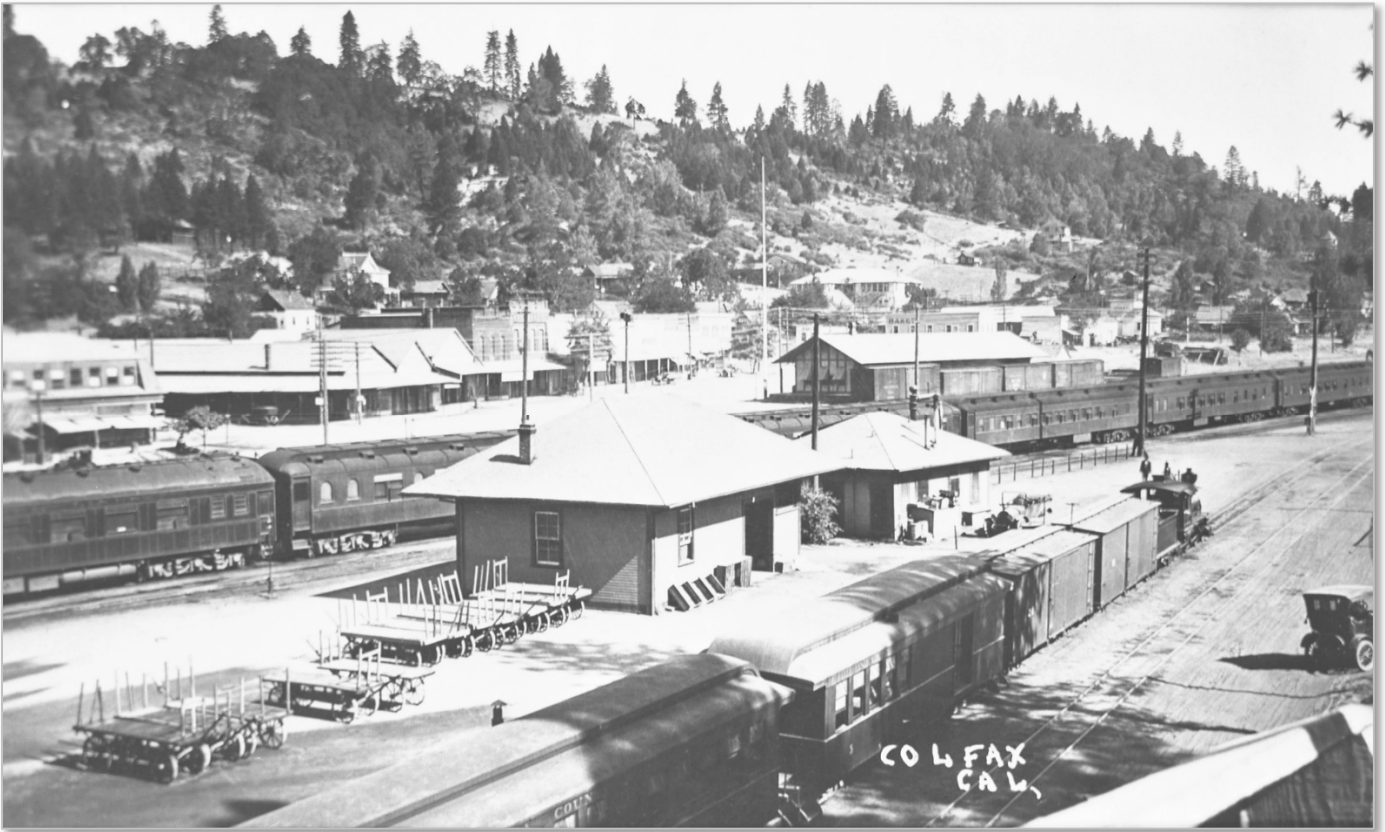
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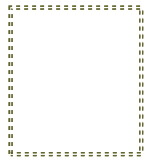
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Colfax, California, 1921. From the Bowers-Keck Collection of the CAHS.



The Colfax Area Historical Society

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