

# Our Town

Milpitas' most unique and inspirational personalities

## Long Ago and Faraway Milpitas

*Historian and orchardist Mabel Mattos has one of the best perspectives in town*

BY KEN YODER REED

“Sproy” might be a good word for her. She seems both durable (at 86) and elegant, like the rows of lead crystal glasses in her cupboards. Mabel Mattos is waiting by the big antique wagon wheels that wall off the orchard from her house. She circles the car to greet me.

“Do you like tangerines?” She hands a bag of them to me, along with a pint of brilliantly orange-colored preserves. “It’s the Blenheim apricots. Joseph planted them.”

She points to the orchard, which hangs on the edge of the cliff, off which if you started somersaulting, you would roll continuously down maybe 300 feet before you hit Evans Road and the beginning of the town proper. “Before he died. He was building our house. Heart attack. He was only 37.”

She points with her father’s pife at the distant Calaveras Boulevard, running west toward the Interstate 880 overpasses. “It was apricots to the left of Calaveras, the whole way to Dempsey. To the right were the hay and peas. And beyond McCarthy, it was pear orchards, as far as you could see. And there were dairies. Mr. Serpa had a dairy on Jacklin with 200 milk cows.”

“And peas, all over the hill behind us, all the way up into Ed Levin, which was Downing Ranch back then. They could only grow in the winter, of course, because they didn’t have water in the hills. They’d plant in November and harvest in April. In those days, their kids would pick the peas. They all had big families. The Portuguese. Ten, 12 children, every family.

“Where do I start my story?” she asks. Mattos leads us into the narrow hallway between the capacious dining room and the bedrooms. Her twin granddaughters Emily and Sarah point out the faces they recognize in the picture frames arranged chockablock on both sides, generations of

Silvas on the south wall, generations of the Mattos family on the north wall.

“And that’s Grandma’s dad,” Sarah says. “Joseph Vierra Silva,” Mattos says. “From Faial, in the Azores. He was a sharecropper on the Downing Ranch. He got a cow, a barn and a shack to live in and a few acres. Just like every other Portuguese family. He got two-thirds of all he produced and the Downings got one-third. There were 15 or 18 families living on the Downing Ranch. In 1886 he went back to the Azores to get Grandma. All the Portuguese men did that.

“New Years was always a big celebration, Dad said. He would play the drum and pife.” She tries to blow the pife and then I try, unsuccessfully. It’s a tricky wooden flute you play sideways. “Some had violins. Some guitars. All self taught. And they would troop from farm to farm, playing. In the rain, often. In boots and raincoats. The farmers would invite them in for a linguica sandwich. Maybe some homemade wine. Then off they go to the next farm, which could be a mile away. All night long and if they missed one farmer, he would feel really hurt.”

“Did they go to the Downing House?” “No. Just to the Portuguese. Milpitas was all Portuguese. In fact, right down to the 1950s. Our neighbors all spoke it at church, but I was poor at it. They’re all gone now, of course.”

“Where did they go?” “They all died. We don’t even have the festa in Milpitas any more. They stopped that in 1975.”

She pronounces it “fiesta.” Portuguese doesn’t seem to pronounce like it spells.

“But Grandma still makes ‘soapage.’ I love her ‘soapage.’ That’s why we come. Her ‘soapage.’” Emily teases but rolls her tongue as if she’s tasting it, right now. (I only discover later that it’s spelled *sopa*, just like the Spanish word for sandwich.)

“Wet bread,” Mattos says. She tells each memory vividly, as if she’s seeing it right now as she speaks, but doesn’t sound the



*“You see them everywhere in the Azores,” Mabel Mattos says, displaying the ornamental wooden rooster that links her to the Portuguese, the resourceful immigrant farm families who built Milpitas a century ago.*

Photo by Ken Yoder Reed

tinest bit nostalgic. The memory is just an artifact of her daily reality, like the jam from the Blenheim apricots and the peas that still cover Ed Levin County Park, in her mind’s eye.

“You brown a piece of beef. Pour spices and vinegar on it. Fill the kettle with water and let it simmer all night. Then you pour the broth in pans and each person pours some over slices of bread and there’s enough for everyone at the festa. Sopa.”

We’re not talking small numbers. There were 4,000 meals served and 25 beef cows butchered for East San Jose’s festa in 2001.

“The Holy Ghost festas,” Mattos explains. She hauls out a huge bound tome with that title. “They still do them lots of places in California, wherever there are Portuguese. But no more in Milpitas.” She has also arranged framed photos on the table for us to study. “This is the Holy Ghost queen. And her court. I wasn’t a queen — I marched behind her. Six of us. It went on for two days every spring. See! The marching band! We paraded down Main Street Milpitas. The band, then the

queen and her court. Other queens we’d invited from other towns. And into the church. St. John the Baptist, where there was a Mass. In Portuguese. And then everybody sat down in the hall for sopa.”

During our interview, she has been disappearing from time to time into the bedroom, each time returning with another artifact — Grandma’s passport, the pife, the book on festas. This time she hands me a small ornamentally painted wooden rooster with an outsized red coxcomb. “You see them everywhere in the Azores. I went back, you know, in the 1990s.”

Mattos has relived her world, the lost world of the adolescent days of Milpitas, 1870 to 1950. We’re outside again, looking at the marvelous sight of nighttime Santa Clara Valley, lit up like strings of winking jewels far below. She looks back at the house, where she lived 45 years as a widow before marrying Henry, Joseph Mattos’ brother. “I just feel sad for Joseph. That he never got to live in the house.”

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*Freelance writer Ken Yoder Reed can be*