

# The gracious life of the Gerstles

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By Irena Narell

The name of Gerstle, which has left its mark prominently upon the city of San Rafael, was among the best known of a large number of California Jewish pioneers. It ranks among other familiar names — Sloss, Fleishacker, Haas and Lilienthal — that go back to the days of the California Gold Rush.

Louis Sloss, patriarch of one of those clans, arrived at Sutter's Fort in 1849 after an arduous journey by wagon train and horseback from St. Joseph, Mo. He was later to be elected president of the Society of California Pioneers.

Lewis Gerstle and Aaron Fleishacker came across the fever-infested Isthmus of Panama in 1850 and 1851. They were partners in the fabled Alaska Commercial Co. The two families were to distinguish themselves in business and the professions and in philanthropy.

With the exhaustion of surface gold ore in the late 1850s, Jewish pioneers, like many others, left the mining towns for San Francisco. They established palatial homes in the city, but by the 1880s they were looking outside San Francisco for sunnier weather in the summer time.

**IN THE SUMMER** of 1881 the Lewis Gerstles rented and ultimately purchased an estate of four and a half hilly acres with house and stable — the area now known as Gerstle Park. The home was given the name Violet Terrace.

Lewis Gerstle installed modern plumbing, replaced the old stable with a greenhouse, and had a new stable built, as well as a separate eight-bedroom building equipped with laundry and storeroom for the servants. Eventually the family quarters proved inadequate and in 1890 another two-story house, The Cottage, was added; and then, in 1892, a third addition was made.

In the clearing of the redwood grove on the property there arose a screened summer pavilion with a conical roof and wooden floor,



A family picnic in Violet Terrace's redwood grove

Note the white tablecloth and the butler

you want," he would tell weekend guests as he greeted them, "but don't touch the water."

Fences between the Gerstle and Sloss properties did not exist and the boundaries were frequently crossed by generations of children. Family lore has it that an idyllic spirit prevailed.

The families would move from San Francisco to San Rafael in late April (with the children transferring to San Rafael for the remainder of the school year), and then return to San Francisco in late September.

During their San Rafael stays, the men would commute daily to their San Francisco

their hospitality. Food was always served with a generous hand. In addition to three bountiful meals daily, sandwiches were always available on the porch in mid-morning and at night a buffet supper awaited those who might feel hunger pangs before bedtime.

Because of friendly competition as to who could serve the best, richest and biggest variety of pastries, the fame of the desserts was to linger for generations.

Lewis Gerstle gave celebrated Sunday breakfasts with goose highlighting the menu. It was not unusual for 20 to 50 guests to sit

Beyond the redwoods were an orchard with apple, cherry and peach trees, and rows of raspberry bushes, to supply the kitchen with fresh fruit and berries. Kitchen gardens provided vegetables for the table and for canning. Cucumbers were processed for dill pickles, berries were made into jam.

Chickens and several cows were kept for fresh eggs and milk, and butter was churned from surplus cream.

BY 1883, THE SLOSSES, with close family ties to the Gerstles, had bought four and a half acres next door and built a large Victorian wooden house with rooms for nine servants and a stable.

Even in those days water shortages occurred in Marin. Louis Sloss, who spent a small fortune each summer in San Rafael, particularly resented the monthly water bills of \$150 or more. "Drink all the champagne

ferryboat from Sausalito. Everyone was driven to the train station in carryalls drawn by two horses and handled by coachmen. Trains were pulled by little woodburning locomotives along Richardson's Bay to Sausalito.

The families took great pride in the perfection of the appearances of their estates. Gardeners were on duty the year around, caring for the profusion of native California and imported evergreens — palms, magnolias and even banana trees — and for the many varieties of shrubbery.

THE GARDENER BEST remembered was Cesare Bettini who attended to the trees, flowers, chickens and the children with equal devotion. He taught the youngsters to appreciate nature and to have consideration for all living things. Flowers were picked for the houses several times weekly.

The two houses presided over by Sarah Sloss and Hannah Gerstle were noted for

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face sheltered family members and numerous friends who had escaped from their burning residences in San Francisco. Other famous San Franciscans occupied the nearby Ritz-Carlton Hotel Hotel.

In the 1920s, the Gerstles' grandson, Charles Lawson, later a Hollywood actor, took his pony No. 10 onto his grand-nephew's high porch. According to a brother, the high-pitched Charlie succeeded in getting the pony into the porch but then he could not persuade the animal to come back down the steps. So he had to ride the pony through the house.

In 1930 the Gerstle heirs donated their property to the City of San Rafael. The deed

Their gardener, Cesare Bettini, was appointed superintendent of Gerstle Park. Cesare's son, Paul Bettini, was elected mayor of San Rafael some four decades later.

The old-fashioned buildings were demolished by a children's playground was donated by a Gerstle daughter in 1946.

The beauty of the estate-turned-park has been preserved magnificently.

NEXT DOOR, the Sloss property was donated to the Trinity Lutheran Church in 1920 and later sold by those recipients. It was turned into a boarding house, but, unfortunately, the structure burned down in 1935.

In the opinion of the Gerstles and the Slosses, "no full moon could equal that seen from Violet Terrace as it rose over the surrounding hills and flooded the gardens.... Romances blossomed, and the garden were perfect settings for weddings, notably that of Alice Gerstle to J. B. Levinson in 1894 and of Louise Sloss to Lloyd S. Ackerman in 1909.

ON SUNDAY MORNINGS many of the younger Slosses and Gerstles played tennis or walked to San Rafael's village center. Evenings brought out musician-friends from San Francisco to help entertain. Or the families sat on the front porch of the Sloss house to watch dazzling displays of fireworks that were set off in the driveway and on the lawn below.

Following the 1906 earthquake, Violet Terrace See Gerstles, page B2

Francisco," tells in its prologue of a Gerstle family reunion in 1975 in the park that bears their name. Attending the picnic were 200 members of the family. And the scenes of fun and family warmth recreated for a time the kind of gracious living that Violet Terrace knew through the decades when the lovely buildings and grounds served as a cherished summer retreat for the Gerstles, their kin and their friends.

Editor's Note: Irene Nereff of Oakland is the author of the book "Our City: The Jews of San Francisco," published by Howell-North Books this year, and profusely illustrated with rare old photographs.

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