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Anne T. Kent California History Room

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Martha Foster Abott

Reminiscences of Fairhills,
The Estate of A. W. Foster

Interviewed by Carla Ehat, Jan 27, 1977

Martha Abbott is speaking about her father, A.W. Foster, who was born in 1850 and who died in 1930. He was a successful businessman and broker, a philanthropist and founder of the Bank of San Rafael which subsequently became the Crocker Bank. He was President of the San Francisco and North Pacific Railroad and Regent of the University of California for 27 years.

He was also an art collector, and one of the founders of the Mount Tamalpais Military Academy.



Fairhills

You may also enjoy reading the complete [transcript](#) of this oral history interview.

Martha: My father was born in Ireland in 1850, and was sent to New York in about 1870 to correct a situation that had gone wrong. He went back to Ireland knowing that he wanted to return and to live in this country. He must have returned in 1871, and he was working as a broker in New York, then he



A.W. Foster

went west and liked it so much that he stayed. In those days if you went to a new place, and you wanted to know the important people, you allied yourself with the Church. So he brought with him a letter of introduction to Dr. William Anderson Scott, the head of the San Francisco Theological Seminary, and the letter introduced him also to Dr. Scott's daughter, and they were married in 1876. Her name was Louisiana because she was born in New Orleans.

I remember that my maternal grandfather, Dr. Scott, was a dynamic person, and that he was with Mr. Muir on one of the trips to Yosemite. It was his writing of it, his enthusiasm when he returned, that was one of the factors that led to the dedication of the valley. He was asked to name one of the falls, Vernal Falls, I think.

Anyway, to return to my mother and father, they were married in 1876, and lived initially in San Francisco. But they started coming to San Rafael for the summers, and they purchased what had been the Mailliard family home. It had been built by Adolph Mailliard, and sold to a Mr. Butterworth who sold it to my father. My mother and father had nine children, Billy, Mary, Anna, Lou, Paul, Martha, Arthur and Ben, actually Arthur came after Mary. Not all of them were born at Fairhills, although I was born on April 8, 1891.

My childhood recollection of my father was of a person who demanded great respect. He did not play easily. My mother was the open door for us children. She played beautifully on the piano, and was gay at heart. She was always quiet, and it seemed to me that she was at home all the time, and did not take part in any of the women's organizations of the early days. Although when my father offered our house and grounds for the Grape Festival, she helped with that. It was not known then as the Grape Festival. It was a garden party for the Presbyterian Orphanage in San Rafael. I remember the building; then they moved out to San Anselmo. The garden party given up the hill in the garden of Fairhills was not held on a practical place. The road was narrow, but after that the Kents so generously took over, and then it became the very famous Grape Festival when it was held on the Kent grounds. My mother however, was one of the group that started the San Rafael Improvement Club. Mrs. Babcock and Mrs. Manzies, and I would think Mrs. Winteringham were very strong in that. My mother was part of the group though she seldom did anything outside of her home. The site of the club was at the end of H Street where Fifth Street comes along and where there was originally a tennis court and a bowling alley. That property was given to the club, and the building was bought from the Exposition in San Francisco, and brought over to the club house. It had been the Victrola building at the Panama Pacific Exposition.

As for my father, I have a photograph of him. He was an handsome gentleman, and very impressive. He was kind and generous. The tragedy of his life was that he wanted to give all the time. He wanted to provide and give to everyone everywhere, and that impoverished him. Jack Mason in the *The Making of Marin* wrote this about 1906: "San Rafael was refuge to hundreds of victims of the 1906 earthquake and fire. A shed two hundred feet long was built in Foster Park, behind the Hotel Rafael, along with two hundred tents that Arthur Foster put up." "A regular tent city," *The Marin Journal* called it, "with telephone, electric lights and sewer connections." I don't remember it all. I thought it was the army that set up tents in the Coleman Tract. Father bought that with the idea of giving it to San Rafael.

Father was very dominant—he was back and forth to the city every day to his office on Sansome Street. Actually all his records were burned there at the time of the fire, every account and anything in his career in San Francisco was burned. The same is true of early family records in Ireland. Outside of Belfast when we tried to find the Fosters records, they all had been destroyed.

Fairhills was a beautiful place to live. We had so much help that it seemed perfectly natural. There was never any strain. We had two butlers, two in the kitchen and two maids upstairs, besides the gardener and the laundryman. We had Chinese kitchen help, and a Japanese butler and helper. But there was complete sense of accord and harmony and great courtesy. I was fond of all of them. My father demanded that all his sons be at the breakfast table at seven in the morning, but he gave up with the daughters! Dinner was always started with a blessing, and was always formal, not according to dress particularly, only that we be clean and neat. There was a type of formality, a solidity in the home. I think the Fairhills Estate was a section and comprised 640 acres. When you entered the house, you came into a hall that I suppose was 14 or 16 feet wide, and it led down to a door that opened into the dining room. That is to say that right at the front door you faced the dining room door which was right at the end of the hall, with big windows where the waterfall came down, where they ran the water. And on the left were what were then called the front and back parlors, and on the right hand side were the billiard room and my father's study. The staircase came down to about midway in the first hall way. On the floors were rugs, not wall-to-wall carpets, and on the walls a sort of red damask, although the front parlor was blue, and the back was definitely red.

Later, the billiard room was moved behind my father's study, and the former billiard room had cupboards built into it where my mother's collection of Pomo baskets was housed. She had a marvelous collection of Pomo baskets which is now in the museum at Sacramento. The kitchen was back of the diningroom. There was a pantry, then a servants dining room, and then a kitchen. And beyond that another dining room for the men from the stables and all, and that was where the laundry was, too. Later on there was a separate laundry room. Upstairs, you went up this wide staircase, there were seven bedrooms, and in the annex there were the maids' quarters. The annex was built above where the kitchen was.

I remember my own bedroom, of course. It had beautiful yellow roses on the walls, and a large gilt mirror over the fireplace. Every room had its own fireplace because there was no central heating plant, except in very early days when there was a white tiled column built at the end of the hall. This was taken out, and they found so much charred wood in the flue from that; it was a wonder the house hadn't burned down. Later on a furnace was put in, but in early days there were only fireplaces. The men brought up the wood and we or the maids or anybody built the fire. I learned to build fires when I was a very little person. We used to smoke corn cobs and puff the smoke up the chimney. My room was around the corner and toward the back. There was my mother's and father's room, a dressing room, and then I had the next room beyond that, all on the second floor.

I will describe, if I can, one of the festive occasions, for example, how we celebrated Christmas at Fairhills. In the early days, gift-giving was on Christmas Eve. On Christmas morning we all lined up outside Mother's and Father's bedroom door, and went in, and our stockings were hanging, and we opened them there in their bedroom around the fireplace. It was always a time of great excitement, and it was desirable that the presents we gave, we had made. We had very little money to spend. The big family dinner used to be on Christmas Eve, then the exchanging of gifts after that, and again in the Christmas morning. The Christmas tree was at the end of the front parlor. It was lit with candles, not for very long; we were careful about it. There was a little disk at the bottom of the candles to catch the wax, and then you just press it into the bough. I only have one memory of that though. We

must have gone to electricity soon after that. At dinner there would just be family members present since there wasn't much room for anyone else.

The last Thanksgiving we had at Fairhills there were 52 members of the family there, with the brothers and sisters and their families. We had long tables that went down between the two parlors, and there were three or four roast turkeys brought on and carved at the table by the girls. I had a very clever Uncle Eb. I have his picture here somewhere, and he was an expert carver, and for some reason we girls were trained to carve, not the boys. At one stage in my life all of us could carve pretty well. Uncle Eb would never use more than one stroke to cut anything. When it came to the wing, it was a slice in this way next to the body, one there and the wing came off. There was pretty much a shut-down on alcohol; very little alcohol was used, and usually we didn't serve wine at the table. After dinner there was no separation of the men and the women, and maybe some of us went to play billiards.

My mother was the center of our musical life. I have still in my bedroom a picture of her at the piano. She could improvise and she would take off different members of the family. She'd say, now here is Martha, and she would play one way, and then here's Paul and she would play another. She was a very delightful person.



Postcard of the San Rafael Presbyterian Church

For our celebration of Easter we would be very much tied up with the Presbyterian Church in San Rafael, not in San Anselmo. San Anselmo was quite a drive, you know. The railroad train, the narrow gauge, came into San Rafael at one time. It was extended, you see, because its real course was up to Point Reyes. But they brought it into San Rafael, and it was disastrous if you were on the horses or ponies and had to pass a train on that road. My sister was thrown out of a surrey when her

team climbed up the bank when the train came along. Those things didn't really matter. I mean, we picked up the pieces and went on. We did ride the train, of course, if we went to the city, but we never took it to West Marin.

They were small but more beautiful than the Shetland ponies with white manes and tails. We were proud of them and the band was kept for a number of years. We brought into the band a Manila type of pony which gave it a more desirable height. But the ponies were beautiful and high-spirited. We sold them to other families in Ross Valley, and kept them in a beautiful barn on the property. It was a



hexagon. We lived on the ponies as much as we could. We had a carriage, of course, a phaeton. It took fifteen minutes to drive to the railroad station, you see. They had to leave at least fifteen or twenty minutes from Fairhills to get to the station where my father would take the train to Tiburon, since he was President and part owner of the San Francisco North Pacific Railroad. He had bought it at auction in 1893 with Sidney V. Smith and Andrew Markham. In *Redwood Railways* Gilbert Kneiss credits my father with opening up the Russian River country as vacation land. I remember the subdivisions; Rio Nido and Mirabelle Park, and Rio Campo was his home place.

I, myself, went to Miss Stewart's Private School which was housed in a converted stable on Fifth Street where the City Hall is today. I was at school with Beatrice Howitt, Sarah Coffin, Marisha Mencher, Dolly Jenkins, Bernice Alexander and the two Boyles. I don't know if we had any regular grades. Later my sisters went to Miss Murieson's in San Francisco, but by the time it was my turn, she had given up her school, I went to a boarding school in Santa Barbara, for two years. It was called Blanchard Campbell, and was up near the Mission. I used to ride down to the ocean on Santa Barbara Avenue before the streets were paved.

Of course, I remember San Rafael when the streets weren't paved. Fourth Street was so muddy in winter. But we spent our vacations on a ranch my father bought at Hopland. It was our favorite place. We had a pear orchard and access to the river, and hill land. There was a main house there but we slept in tents. We took our ponies there; I think they were put on a train in a box car. There we had complete charge of our pony, the care of the stall, everything about them. We used to ride down to the river in the afternoon for swimming. The Russian River was a lovely place.

I associate Claire Nichols with those summers. There's a picture of her and my sister, Lou, in a two seater trap at Bolinas. Lou, you know, ran the Lodge at Yosemite for a while. She went up there, and lived at the Ahwahni, and later on she ran the tavern up in the big trees, the Wawona. She was an



amazing person. She never married though she had more beaux than you could count. They had a very happy young group and had awfully good times together. I was a sort of hanger-on because I was four years younger than she, and I trailed along.

We often rode or drove over to Bolinas, I remember. In the early days there was a stage coach, but we usually rode or drove our own. There were barns there that we could put our horses in. Dipsea was a delightful place to go. We would often go for a week or two. We didn't have a home there, but we had houses that we could rent. The Almer Newhalls had a lovely place right down on the beach. Almer was married to my cousin Anna Scott.

All of us I remember went east in a private rail car with father to the St. Louis Exposition in 1904 when I was about thirteen. I only remember certain incidents of course, only a little of the Fair, and we came home via Canada. We drove in a surrey to see Lake Louise, and the hotel was a little white cottage. And from there we went to Banff, and that was a big place, very grand and formal. Goodness we were astonished at that. Of the train ride itself I remember that we had awfully nice porters and nice dining room service and all. We were never surprised at anything like that and it never occurred to us that we were doing anything different than anybody else. If anyone did live differently we thought that that was the way they chose to live. There was never a large system they were battling through, at least it never occurred to us.

In 1889 my father had purchased at auction a dairy ranch in San Anselmo known as Sunnyside. At about the same time the trustees of the San Francisco Presbyterian Seminary were thinking of moving. My father invited to see his property, and he said would donate the land if the trustees would make improvement of \$25,000 to it within two years. I think my grandfather Scott was already dead. Yes of course he died in 1885, and my grandmother a few years later. Some of the land my father gave to the Seminary they had to sell off. And it was in a dreadful financial state, so in order to

develop and maintain itself they sold off the flat land, between the railroad, as it was then, and the hill. So that tract that is crowded with houses as far as Montgomery Chapel was part of the original grant. They went through many years of stringent financial need. Many of the professors served without pay. As for the buildings, Scott Hall, Montgomery Hall and Chapel, Mr. Montgomery's money did most of that. He was a man that Grandfather Scott had persuaded to be interested in Presbyterian development and he gave the money for those buildings. Mind you, the old tower of Scott Hall collapsed in the 1906 earthquake, but still the Seminary has the most beautiful situation in all Marin County.



San Francisco Theological Seminary

I also remember that I hated church when I was a child. We went to Sunday School and church every week. The whole center pew of the Presbyterian Church was our family, you see, and I used to come home and cry, I hated it so. I don't know why I didn't like the worship there. Dr. White was our minister. He went to serve in the First World War, and we then had one of the men from the Seminary come in and preach. We called him "Long and Dreary Day" because his name was Dr. Day, but he was one of the great scholars of the day!

I have written something of my feelings about growing up in San Rafael which I shall read to you.

One looks back on one's early days centered in Fairhills with gratefulness. We were given freedom, a development of our physical and mental resources. We had a sense of solidarity at home and confidence in the guidance we received there. San Rafael was really a village. When it was suggested that Fourth Street was going to be paved, my cousin said, "Oh dear, I think we're going to have a boom!" Mud was often four inches deep, while at the corners long stones invited the hope of a dry crossing. At a livery stable on Fourth Street was a friendly and able person who would send a man to the barn on the hill for shoeing of horses and ponies. I remember Mrs. Hoover who would bring delicious ice cream sodas to the trap when we stopped at her delightful candy store, and all the time the ponies would be restless to go. And I remember Thompson's Dry Good Store at the corner of C and Fourth, a mysterious and exciting place with garlands hung on strips above the counters. It was later bought by Mr. Albert who gave so much to the community in later years. Also I remember the Hotel San Rafael as a beautiful building with wide verandas and high backed rocking chairs. I remember riding there. The hotel had a thick cypress maze, and two paved tennis courts with shaded grandstands so that tournaments could be held there. The hotel had impressive front gates with a road leading to the hotel. Half-way along the road was a grotto, always a mysterious and spooky place to us. The Coleman Tract, now Dominican Meadows, was near the hotel. This is where the tents were set up to shelter the refugees from the earthquake and fire of 1906. The armory on Fourth Street was a meeting place for all those who wanted to help, and I remember being there with borrowed sewing machines and bolts of cloth sewing cotton flannel nightgowns. Mounted patrols from the Tamalpais Military Academy were added to the police force at the time and were equipped with loaded rifles and rode as far as Corte Madera because there were

those who wanted to pillage. I have so many childhood memories which inspire an absorbing interest in today's search for new values. I have found that it has taken many years to begin to understand the source of past efforts, and to be sympathetic to the materialism of today. I think we had a wonderful life.

You may also enjoy reading the complete [transcript](#) of this oral history interview.

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