

In 1838 Don Ignacio Martinez was granted a large parcel of property, over 17,000 acres, part of which was the Pinole Rancho. Little did he know that within a few years the beginnings of the village of Hercules would be on some of that very land. The property was located along San Pablo Bay in a series of hills and ravines. Refugio Creek ran quietly through, emptying into the bay. The hills were covered with trees. Red fox, deer, rabbit and other wildlife were abundant. Many small farms and ranches dotted the fertile lands between Pinole and busy Port Costa.

Mail was carried by pony express; packages were shipped by one of the many wagon freight lines that criss-crossed the county, since trains had not yet come to California.

Dr. Samuel Tennent came from England via the Sandwich Islands during the gold rush and, in 1848 settled in Pinole. He was the first doctor in the area. In 1849 he married Rafaela Martinez, the daughter of Ignacio.

By 1860 Dr. Tennent had accumulated extensive wealth, in addition to that of his wife. He farmed and ranched many acres of the Pinole Rancho, which his wife had inherited. He ran cattle and a number of horses. The house was staffed by two Indians, Louisa and her daughter, Delphina. The farm and ranch employed eight men.

In 1860 Pinole was a multicultural town. Its citizens came from all over the United States, the Sandwich Islands, England, Peru, Spain, Portugal, Chile, Mexico, Germany, Prussia and Ireland. In 1873 Pinole represented 400 voters in the 1st district of Contra Costa county. 1878 the first post office was established in Pinole and Bernardo Fernandez, neighbor of the Tennents, was appointed postmaster.

Bernardo Fernandez was born in Portugal in 1832 and went to sea at the age of 13. He came to San Francisco via the Horn in 1858 and established a freight business in Pinole. He farmed more than 3,000 acres and became one of the wealthiest and most prominent men in the county. In 1859 he married nineteen-year-old Carletta Caudra, who had just come from Chile. Their home, the Fernandez Mansion, still stands at the foot of Tennant Avenue.

Dr. Tennent, acting for his late wife, sold the first piece of land to the California Powder Works on September 26, 1879. The view from the property looked out over the bay. Mt. Tamalpais could be seen to the southwest. Directly across were the mountains of Marin County. On a clear day the mouth of the Petaluma River was visible. To the north, Mare Island and south Vallejo could be seen on the water's edge, with the mountains of Napa rising high in the background.

The main plant would be built in one of the many ravines that made the property perfect for the manufacture of dynamite. In the event of an explosion, the homes in nearby Pinole, over the hill, would not be damaged. The land was cleared of trees. An Indian herder brought his sheep to keep the grass low, so in case of fire, it would not spread.

As the years went by, the herd grew to nearly 3,000 sheep, now owned by the company. They roamed, keeping the grass short. A full-time herder lived in a shack near the present day Bell Telephone building on Sycamore Avenue. He, with his dogs, raised the sheep and gathered their wool. When work at the plant slowed down during shearing time, employees helped the herder shear the sheep.

In later years, the company sold the sheep and gave up its exclusive rights to the sales of the wool. The new owner kept the sheep on the land where they continued performing their fire prevention duties. Later, packs of dogs from the Hercules and Pinole areas began killing sheep in large numbers. The sheep were moved and replaced with cattle.

In 1870, the California Power Works had two plants. One was in Santa Cruz and the other in San Francisco in what is now Golden Gate Park. As the city expanded and homes moved out toward the plant, California Powder Works was told they would have to move for safety's sake.

The company had employed many Chinese building the railroad across the Sierra, and when the new location was ready, the Chinese moved with it and lived in China Camp, which consisted of two long wooden dormitories located about 200 yards from the plant's main entrance. The dormitories housed as many as 375 men. Three levels

of bunks stretched the length of the walls in the sleeping quarters. Each bunk was divided into 4 ft. by 6 ft. spaces and rented by the Chinese labor boss. At the end of each building was the kitchen and dining room, fragrant with the odor of incense and spices of their native foods.

After the railroad was finished in 1870, many came to San Francisco. Because of their expertise handling dynamite and nitroglycerin, they continued to work for the California Powder Works.

China Camp was under the supervision of a shrewd and well-known Chinese named Hong Quong. In San Francisco he was considered a very wealthy aristocrat; however, no one knew where his wealth came from, that he was paid in gold coin for every service or favor he performed for his fellow countrymen. Some of those services included getting a job with the California Powder Works. He made certain that the man held that job and that he had board and lodging. Another service which added to his income was allowing the boarder to sit and eat at the table in the dining room. Quong charged a lesser price if the food was eaten standing up. These services all brought profit to Quong, in gold coin.

The Chinese worked in the nitroglycerin lines. The job was dangerous and life consuming. For 10 hours a day, six days a week, most Chinese laborers received only \$1.25 a day, about 12 cents an hour. The Chinese were paid far less than the white worker, even though they held more dangerous jobs. If one were injured, he turned to the Chinese man of medicine. In some instances, this man was well educated in medicine, and had come to the United States to escape life in China. His treatments consisted mainly of herbs. If he had a broken bone or severe injuries requiring surgery, the anesthetic used was opium. Opium was illegal and was sometimes smuggled into the country in soapstone figurines. Tiny holes were drilled into the figurine. Opium paste would be used to fill the holes and a powder of ground soapstone would be created to re-plaster the entire figurine, making it look like solid stone, but hiding the opium. These figurines were sold in Chinatown in Oakland or San Francisco.

Opium was also used by the men during off hours. After work they stayed to themselves, playing poker or

the Chinese game of fan-tan while the scent of opium pipes drifted through the room. Occasionally fights broke out and were quickly settled. They never fought with a white man. Wages were paid once a month at noon on Saturday. After receiving their pay, the Chinese quickly made their way to the railroad depot where they purchased round-trip tickets to San Francisco, returning to work on Monday.

Since the majority of the plant's employees were Chinese, the plant closed for one week early in the year to allow them to celebrate Chinese New Year. Most left for San Francisco to partake in the New Year activities with friends and relatives. Then, as now, the holiday was celebrated with colorful parades, foods and fireworks. Not all Chinese worked in the plant. Some operated laundries, small restaurants, served in homes as servants, cooks and gardeners. Others were merchants and brought their wares each week to sell door to door. Some brought fabrics, notions, pots and pans. Others brought fresh vegetables, fruits, fish and poultry.

After they were expelled from the county, a Chinese merchant from San Francisco traveled to Hercules on the Southern Pacific train once a week. He carried his wares in wicker baskets attached with a long pole that he wore oxen style. He visited each home selling fresh fruit, vegetables and, to the children's delight, Chinese candy.

For 35 years the Chinese served as trustworthy and loyal employees in the production of explosives in Hercules. Before the last man left China Camp in late 1913, several had been killed in accidents at the plant.

The area seemed destined to become industrial. Many small companies from meat packing plants to lumber mills began to spring up, wanting to be near the water transportation and the railroad. There were other dynamite plants in the area. Both Judson Powder Works and the Granite Powder Company began operations in Pinole.

In November 1883, a telephone was placed in the sheriff's office in Martinez, and Port Costa had grown into one of the busiest ports on the Sacramento River.

In December of 1883, the California Redwood Company purchased 20 acres near Pinole for their yards on the water's edge. When the railroad was in operation, 96 trains a day ran between Port Costa and Oakland via Pinole. Three thousand tons of rails were used for that stretch of twenty-two mile long, double track railroad.

The second largest ship under sail passed by Hercules in 1885, loaded with 45,000 sacks of wheat grown in Contra Costa County.

A new Catholic church was built in Pinole and dedicated March 8, 1885.

In 1886 the anti-Chinese movement was strongly under way in the county. In June of 1887 citizens gathered along the shore to see the large bark-rigged ship "Roswell Sprague" glide by under full sail in a spanking breeze. She was carrying 600,000 feet of cedar plank and timber for railroad bridges, tunnels and culverts that were being constructed along the line.

On February 29, 1888, the steamship Julia blew up as it was leaving the wharf at Slough Vallejo with seventy passengers on board. Forty were killed. The steamer was burned to the water and fire spread to the petroleum tank on the wharf. The entire structure was in flames that could be seen from the shores of Hercules.

In 1889 Bernardo Fernandez sold 24.3 acres of land to The California Powder Works for \$500 in gold coin.

President Harrison's train passed by in 1891. Residents lined the railroad tracks waving flags and cheering.

July 13, 1892, at about 9:00a.m., five or six separate explosions rocked Giant Powder Works at Flemings Point in West Berkeley. The concussions caused destruction to buildings and windows in Oakland, San Francisco and Berkeley. The shock was also felt in Hercules.

In 1895 the refinery business came to the West County. The Union Oil Company purchased the real estate and wharf of the California Lumber Yard Company in

Rodeo, to erect a refinery and establish the town of Oleum, where the workers would live.

July 30, 1898, an explosion in the nitroglycerin house at The California Powder Works resulted in the death of four and wounded fifteen. There were two separate explosions about three and one-half hours apart.

December 5, 1898, the gelatin house of the nearby Judson Powder Works was blown up. The supervisor and four Chinese were killed instantly.

March 1899, the tunnel for the Southern Pacific was completed between Hercules and Rodeo. It is 18 feet square and 1,045 feet long. The plant had grown. The California Powder Works decided to build homes for its workers, believing it was in the mutual interest of the company and the employees that they live as near to the plant as possible. Employees in management positions lived on the "hill", while the laborers lived in the Village, where neighbors watched out and cared for one another. Queen Anne cottages were built prior to the turn of the century on Pinole and Bay Streets. In the early 1900's a second group, Colonial Revival in style, were built on Bay, Hercules, Park, Pinole and Santa Fe streets.

Around 1915, duplexes were built on Hercules and Bay to house new employees. The last cluster of homes, on Skelly, Dunham and Bacchus streets, were constructed in a simple, less ornate style.

In 1897, the plans for a multi-roomed, three story wooden clubhouse were drawn up. This was to become the center of social activity for the male workers, excluding women and Chinese. Building began in 1899. When completed, it housed a barber shop, billiard tables, card room, and a dance floor that also served as a boxing ring. There was a stage, kitchen, library, reading room, showers and baths. Indoor swimming pools were uncommon, but in the basement of the clubhouse was a lead-lined pool 20 ft. wide and 30 ft. long and 9 ft. deep at the deepest point. Later, the pool was removed and replaced by a two-lane bowling alley. The third floor was used as a meeting hall and drafting room. The Club provided some activities for the women. The Halloween, Valentine's Day and other holiday dances were big social affairs. Club members could invite

friends from Pinole and other areas. At Christmas the Club threw a Yuletide party for the families. Each child received a gift. Once a year the Club sponsored a family picnic, which was held on the beautiful plant grounds in Refugio Valley.

A large, wooden administration building housed the office of the superintendent and his engineers until fire burned it to the ground in 1901. It was replaced by a brick building that contained the main switchboard, a printing press and a post office. As the plant expanded, a two-story brick building equipped with a modern lab was erected overlooking San Pablo Bay and the plant below.

The chief clerk and his family resided in the home across the street from the administration building. Later it housed the county library, then the Hercules Plant Hospital, one of the first industrial hospitals in California with a resident physician. It was a pioneer in the deadly explosive trade. Much later, the police department was located there.

On December 15, 1900, with a population of less than 100, Hercules officially became an incorporated town. After much deliberation, the name of Hercules was decided on; an appropriate choice, since residents and employees had already been calling the village by that name for many years. The name comes from a potent and explosive black powder first made in the California Powder Works' Santa Cruz plant. The company named their product after Hercules, the Greek mythological hero known for his strength. The name signified how potent the black powder was.

In the summer of 1913 a massive chicken wire and stucco work of art was constructed. Hercules, the mighty hero, stood draped in his lion skin robe, powerful and ready, his club resting on his shoulder with his hands clasped tightly around the handle. He overlooked San Pablo Bay, about 50 feet from the Southern Pacific Railroad tracks, in plain view of the passengers, who were embarrassed to see that Hercules was exposed in every manner. Complaints were made to the California Powder Works Company. The Hero Hercules was dynamited in the late '20's. The statue had seen World War I come and go... the expansion of the plant and village. He had heard the roar of the '20's and was destroyed at the end of the happy years and the birth of the depression.

Christopher Ellerhorst, sometimes called Charles, was born in Germany in 1839 and came to Pinole in 1859. He and His wife Christine owned and farmed the only land in Hercules that did not belong to the powder company. He built his home in the Spanish style; curved arches with vines shaded the front verandah and entrance. Inside, leather was used to cover some of the walls. The home was a busy place with the four Ellerhorst daughters and one son. The farm is next to San Pablo Avenue, adjacent to the Santa Fe Railroad station. It is still a working farm, though much smaller in scale. Two of the daughters were educated to become teachers. Frances Ellerhorst, the eldest daughter, became the principal of the 395 student Pinole-Hercules Elementary School, which was noted for its high academic standards. She ruled the school with an iron fist and a kind heart. The teachers cared about each child and demanded the students learn their lessons. If they misbehaved, they were punished. There were a few that objected to the discipline and fought back. They didn't win. Then, as now, teaching the children of many languages was a problem. As the Chinese left the plant, Portuguese came and ultimately made up 50% of the plant's entire labor force.

The Hercules Village and Pinole existed as one community, sharing shops, restaurants and saloons. The Clubhouse, which provided the company employees with light meals, wines and beer, operated on a limited schedule. When payday came, the bachelors headed for one of Pinole's 14 saloons. They purchased their necessities at A.B. Greenfield's Bazaar in Pinole.

October 7, 1910 the Pinole Hotel was totally destroyed by fire. A few days later, on October 15, sixteen families were left homeless in Rodeo when a lamp overturned in a barn while a woman was milking a cow. Lack of water hindered the firefighters.

November 16, 1912, Judson Dynamite & Powder Company of Pinole was sold to E.I. DuPont de Nemours Powder Company, the parent company of The California Powder Works. In 1906 they paid \$10 in gold for the title to the 1,300 acre Hercules plant. In 1912 Hercules Powder Company was incorporated in Delaware...still, in essence part of DuPont.

The ladies of Hercules kept busy with homemaking chores. Without modern conveniences, housewives were faced with the never-ending tasks of keeping house. They washed the clothes by hand on a washboard or, if they were lucky, they had a wringer washing machine. The clothes were hung to dry on the clothesline, ironed with an iron that had to be heated on the wood, coal or oil stove. Electricity was not yet in every home. Fabrics were not wash and wear! Cleaning was difficult. Wonder cleaners had not been invented, just soap and water; there were no microwave ovens, few gas stoves, no refrigerators. Cooking a meal could take all day. Dishes were washed and dried by hand. Ice from the ice plant was brought to each home for the iceboxes, which were the only means of preserving food. Children waited impatiently for the ice wagon, hoping to get a sliver of ice to suck on. Without refrigeration, groceries had to be purchased frequently. Carpet sweepers were used because there were few, if any, vacuum cleaners, or the carpets were hung outside and beaten with a carpet beater. The floors had to be scrubbed by hand. The garden had to be weeded and watered and, in late summer, vegetables and fruit picked and canned. Jellies and jams were made and stored in glass containers in the cool part of the pantry. Bathrooms were outhouses; toilet paper was rough and hard. Even taking a bath brought the challenge of heating the water on the stove, then filling the tub. Often, the same water was re-used, beginning with the smallest child first, then the girls and finally, the boys. If they wished to go shopping, they walked to Pinole. Every morning a man from Ruffs store in Pinole came to the back door and took orders for groceries. Later that day, the food would be delivered by horse and buggy.

Since the late 1800's, women worked in the shell house, packing dynamite as well as doing the traditional jobs of secretary and later, telephone operators.

The men had the clubhouse and the ladies had Triangle Park. Bordered by the well-kept homes of plant employees, Triangle Park was a small landscaped jewel of manicured lawns and tall, sturdy palm trees where children ran free. There, the ladies met to visit or play whist. At 4.30 p.m., however, they went home to prepare dinner for their families. During World War 1, the Community Center was constructed in the park and served the entire village. In the '20's, dance classes

were taught and community dances were held. Occasionally, the center was used for town meetings and as a voting place. A library was also housed there.

While their fathers worked and their mothers tended the house, the boys of Hercules kept busy. They switched pull carts from the Southern Pacific depot to the Santa Fe and vice-versa, raised one of the Fernandez' buggies up the post office flagpole and, when boredom really set in, tipped over outhouses in people's back yards.

Street lamp globes became targets for boys with slingshots and air pistols. After many globes were replaced, an ordinance outlawing the use of such weapons was passed. Although slingshots and air pistols were banned, many boys took hunting rifles to the black powder plant in Refugio Valley, shooting the plentiful rabbit, quail, dove and opossum.

They swam in the bay on rafts fashioned from railroad ties and scrap lumber. The rafts, which resembled small islands, contained as many as eight ties nailed together. They paddled them as far as a mile and a half out into the waters of San Pablo Bay.

The Company permitted fishing from its wharf. The boys made fishing poles of sturdy branches and a string with hooks. They caught numbers of sea perch, commercial crabs, striped bass and flounder, which they proudly took home for dinner.

The wharf was made of wood with a small building on the end. No smoking or fires were allowed. The boys foolishly sneaked cigarettes into the little building. Smoke seeped out the window, giving the boys away. Consequently, the wharf was off limits to all, including the innocent non-smokers. The ultimate thrill was to maneuver a waxed piece of wood down the slippery grass on the hillside by the Masonic Lodge, about 100 feet. They rode with reckless abandon, sometimes getting hurt, but always having fun.

They borrowed pushcarts from the carpentry shops and pulled them to the top of a nearby hill. At the summit, the boys pointed their vehicles toward the opening that led to the wharf and on the word "go", hung on for dear life as the cart zoomed down the hill.

Skillful drivers could "bump" the end of the wharf without falling into the bay.

Four inches of snow fell in 1913 - the first many Hercules youngsters had ever seen. Tree branches glittered with the frosty snow. It was great sport to hit a branch, making the snow fall on some unsuspecting head. Snowball fights erupted, and snowmen were constructed with care. While it lasted, the snow made each yard into a wonderful playground.

The girls made their own fun, rarely joining the boys. Bicycles were their main source of entertainment. The girls biked to their friends' houses, to the store or the soda shop. As they grew older, they traded bikes for tennis racquets. They gathered at the courts near Triangle Park as long as there was light to play by.

In the evenings, the girls congregated to listen to music and try to dance the latest dances. Big events, such as the dances at the Clubhouse, were anticipated for days. Much thought and planning went into what to wear, the buying or making of new dresses. Birthday parties were celebrated with homemade ice cream and cake.

The girls were not allowed to work at the plant, but the boys were offered several opportunities to make money. Because minors were forbidden in the area where explosives were produced, many of the older boys worked in a non-explosive part of the plant called the sack wash. The nitro was shipped from Chile in bags that had to be washed after they were emptied. The wash area was located at the water's edge, near the bridge over the Southern Pacific tracks.

Boys 16 and over worked for 35 cents an hour boiling the sacks in fresh water washes, then hanging the dripping sacks on lines where they dried in Bay breezes.

The sons of the plant superintendent earned spending money by selling milk that was left over after milking the cows that were kept in their parents' stables. After school, they delivered the milk in porcelain buckets to the villagers.

Setting pins for the bowlers in the Clubhouse was another after school job, but only for the boys.

The Community Center was chosen as the location for the Kindergarten. Children could play on the swings, slides and other equipment, after school.

As automobiles became more popular, residents traveled to Richmond, Berkeley, Oakland and San Francisco for leisure activities and the Community Center was used less and less. The idle building was sold to St. Joseph's Church in Pinole. It was cut into three pieces and, with many excited children and parents looking on, was laboriously moved to its present location and reassembled to serve as St. Joseph's parish hall.

Triangle Park remained as a place for Hercules children to spend many happy hours.

Living on the hill was considered the biggest advantage of being a boss. The hill people had exclusive rights to the gas tank located at the side of the clubhouse. The villagers had to go to Pinole. The children who resided on the hill were driven to school. Youngsters living just yards down the slope walked. Homes on the hill had gardeners. The people in the village tended their own yards.

The superintendent of the Powder Works lived in "White Columns", the mansion on the hill that had been built in 1900.

Two white pillars, covered with roses, graced the entrance to the long driveway leading to the stone steps up to a wide verandah supported by wooden columns, which ran the length of the front and west side of the house.

The front door opened to a large living room. Rounded bay windows framed a beautiful view of the shoreline and San Pablo Bay. The walls were covered with alternating strips of redwood paneling and red stained burlap. The furniture was the latest in decor; rich woods gleamed and horsehair upholstery made the settees and chairs soft and comfortable.

Upstairs were five bedrooms, and above the two main stories was an attic where the domestic help lived. In the basement were apartments, a laundry room

and a large pantry, where jellies, jams and citruses were kept.

The surrounding gardens were maintained by two gardeners. Greengage plum, apple trees and many types of flowers made the gardens a perfect setting for numerous parties. The grounds were maintained as a park years after the house was tragically torn down in 1945

In the fall of 1916, the people of Hercules were faced with what appeared to be a mild intestinal disease caused by polluted Pinole Creek water used for auxiliary drinking, and by unsanitary conditions from old, open outhouses.

This was a mild foreshadowing of an epidemic called "the Spanish Influenza", a serious intestinal disease which would claim many lives around the county and later, the nation.

Two years later, on October 24, 1918, the Board of Trustees passed an emergency ordinance directing the wearing of gauze masks to curb the epidemic. Public and private gatherings were prohibited. By Halloween, four had died in Hercules and, by November 29 over 475 cases had been treated. There were fourteen deaths.

1917 brought World War I. The plants increased production, which made Hercules the largest TNT producing plant in the United States. Prior to 1915 the plant produced only dynamite, but because of the war in Europe, it began producing TNT, another kind of explosive used primarily in munitions.

With the expansion, the company was inundated with new employees, who lived in dormitories built opposite the east entrance to the clubhouse. For \$20 a month, the men could sleep, wash and shower. Other boarding houses were built down the hill.

The company quickly built a long dining room beneath a beautiful grove of trees across from the clubhouse. At first, only the single men who lived in the dormitories ate there. Soon it became known for its excellent meals and more bachelors than non-bachelors were served.

Since the plant operated constantly, dining hours were scheduled to serve each shift. Three highly skilled chefs kept the dining room open around the clock, creating delicious meals from the fresh food kept in the ice plant in the dining room's basement. After the war, with fewer men to feed, the dining room was closed.

Fear of German spies caused the company to hire one hundred guards to patrol the perimeter of the plant and adjacent land. They were National Guardsmen and soldiers from the Spanish American War. They were stationed about 300 feet apart, within signaling distance, along the fence line. Others patrolled on horseback. They ate in the dining room and were housed near the main entrance, in a roomy one-story building. They remained at the plant for the duration of the war.

In 1916 two Russian military inspectors, representing the Czar, came to look the plant over. In addition to the industrial wonders of Hercules, they were wined and dined at White Columns. Orders were received to ship dynamite and black powder to Russia. The Czar's dynasty fell in November 1917. One can only speculate what part, if any, Hercules played in the Russian Revolution.

After World War I, the nation was giddy. Peace brought prosperity and new inventions. Cars were becoming common, the train ran efficiently and often, movies were great fun, parties were popular. The country moved through the '20's thinking the good life would never end. But it did, with the crash of Wall Street in 1929 and the great depression of the '30's.

Walt Disney created the first Mickey Mouse movie, called "Steamboat Willie." Shirley Temple became everyone's little girl and every little girl's idol. The Wizard of Oz introduced Judy Garland and the song, "Over the Rainbow". Popular reading was "Gone With the Wind", which was soon made into an epic motion picture, along with "Bambi."

The time was the '30's and the Depression had begun. The effect was felt everywhere. The worst years were 1932 to 1935, when twelve and a half million Americans were unemployed.

The South, Eastern and Mid-western sections of the country were hardest hit. Men, women and children stood in breadlines, hungry and cold. Kansas, Oklahoma and Texas had suffered dry weather and were living in what would be remembered as "The Dust Bowl". Those people flocked to what they had heard was the "land of plenty", California. The most popular song was "Buddy, Can You Spare a Dime?"

The world heard about a short politician in Germany who seduced the German populace with his fiery speeches. His name was Adolph Hitler.

Hercules Powder Company experienced a slowdown in production. President Franklin D. Roosevelt asked companies to keep as many people working as possible. In 1933, employees went from a six day week to a four day week, thus decreasing the number of men who were laid off. Still, many lost their jobs. Unemployment insurance did not exist at that time, nor did many Companies have pension plans. Social Security had not yet been conceived. Men with perfect work records for the past 25 to 30 years suddenly found themselves out of work.

The depression's effect on those who continued to work at the plant was not outwardly visible. It was masked in the neatly kept little homes, the trimmed lawns and the grand palm trees. However, the people of Hercules were like one family and the plight of those who were laid off touched and influenced the lives of friends and relatives who remained employed.

Layoffs and lack of money were not the only problems people faced. Workers at the plant also had to cope with long and short-term health effects of handling dynamite. The "powder" or nitroglycerin headache was only one chronic hazard. It was caused by both dust inhalation and the handling of black powder. When the men got the powder on their hands, the nitroglycerin was absorbed, their heartbeat increased and blood rushed to their head causing a pounding pain... like an ice pick through the center of the head. Nausea accompanied the headaches. An employee had to be weaned from his old job to a new one gradually. Any change in job location caused illness much like an addiction, and since jobs were highly valued, men suffered from the first workday to the last in the

week, trying to recover on their days off, only to begin again on the next workday.

The little politician, Hitler, began invading countries in Europe, laying the groundwork for another war. The Japanese also began invasions in Asia and the Pacific. While the United States was not yet involved, the country watched as the invasions got closer to our allies, China, England, Russia and France. Italy aligned herself with Hitler.

Then on December 7, 1941 the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. It seemed the enemy was everywhere, especially in people of German and Italian descent, who were forced to move inland. They were allowed to return after signing loyalty oaths.

The war put people back to work, finally ending the long depression. Men joined the armed forces by the dozens. Frank Sinatra, a skinny singer from New Jersey, was just becoming radio's most popular singer, along with Bing Crosby.

The government thought the Hercules plant could become a target of saboteurs, so 80 Missouri Reserves, men from 25 to 75 years old, worked as guards, residing in the top floor of the Clubhouse. The around-the-clock guards checked in for duty at the guardhouse.

Watch houses were located at various points along what was called the "Burma Road", which ran along the plant's perimeter inside the fence. This road was patrolled on three-wheeled motorcycles.

There were no reports of sabotage. Abandoned cars and trespassers became the guards' most pressing problems. On New Year's Eve, 1943, a solitary watchman, stationing himself on the bridge, leaned his Browning automatic rifle against the rail and stomped his feet to keep warm. The rifle fell to the ground, discharging a single bullet that shot through the main natural gas line. This incident closed down the entire plant for over three hours while repairs were made.

Another night, a watchman spotted a trespasser in the dynamite storage area and gave chase. The intruder ran; the guard shot at him and missed. The angry trespasser turned and yelled, "What the hell did you do that for?" The stunned guard fired five more shots and missed each time. The trespasser escaped.

As the war progressed, more younger and able-bodied men went overseas. Jobs previously held by men were offered to wives, sisters and girlfriends. Women had held non-hazardous jobs at the plant, but now they worked virtually everywhere. The shell house, where dynamite was packed, the powder line, acid department and power house all had women workers. They received the same wages as men for the same jobs.

Women with an education in chemistry worked in the laboratory and earned more money than less educated males. They were not allowed in the all-male Clubhouse, a tradition that lasted until after the plant no longer made dynamite. Things changed somewhat after the Oil, Chemical, Atomic Workers Union came in. One worker remembers, "It was like an old man's home until the union came in, with employees and bosses co-existing like one big family." Relations between worker and management remained good because the demands were not out of line and the company complied. There were no strikes.

On a cool December morning in 1944, operations were running normally when everything seemed to leap into the air. An earsplitting roar, accompanied by a huge pillar of smoke, rose into the sky and then mushroomed out. Almost immediately, after the noise of the blast died down, the moans of the injured and the screams of the women could be heard.

The nitroglycerin mixer had exploded, killing two men and injuring a total of twenty-five. One woman in the recreation hall of Triangle Park suffered a fractured skull when the ceiling collapsed. The injured were taken to the plant hospital. "Even before I heard the blast, something seemed to force the air out of my lungs. It seemed a long time before I could regain my breath," a survivor recalled. The tremendous force of the blast broke nearly every window in the village and shattered windows in three counties, injuring more people from glass fragments.

It was the coldest time of the year, so the Hercules Powder Company quickly employed a contractor who, along with others, worked night and day putting tarpaper over the broken windows to keep out the freezing December winds and rain.

The Navy moved in and took control of the chaotic Hercules village and plant. They roped off the area to ensure no one entered or left without proper permission.

The FBI arrived on the scene soon after to investigate the possibility of enemy sabotage. No evidence was found. By piecing information together, the cause became clear. Two buildings, the nitroglycerin neutralizer building and the storehouse, were destroyed. Nitro was carried by gravity down a V-shaped gutter from the neutralizer to the storehouse, where it fell into a tank of water, which cushioned its fall. Whatever happened, happened at the storehouse. The nitro running in the gutter must have fused right up to the other building, blowing them both up at the same time.

In 1948, three and one-half years later, another blast killed two workers. It occurred in the nitroglycerin manufacturing department.

"I was running the dynamite machine and knew there was an explosion before I heard it. There was glass dancing along the floor, so I reached up and shut the tamps off, stopping the machine process. You get the flash first, but I was too far away to get the flash. Then the force of the explosion pushes air into its center and sucks it out and then you get the bang last. If you hear the bang you're safe!"

The explosion destroyed one large building, creating a gaping hole several feet deep, shattering windows in Hercules and Pinole and causing reverberations in neighboring cities.

"As we made our way to the blast site, word circulated that there was nothing left but a hole in the ground. It looked like a crater. The dirt was pulverized to as fine a dust as you ever saw in your life. It was a squarish round hole where the building once stood." The bulkheads, or dirt mounds designed to confine the blast from spreading, were almost completely destroyed. A one-ton chunk of metal rocketed into a eucalyptus tree where it sat suspended off the ground. Burning fragments of the demolished 50 by 60 foot building scattered like hail over a wide area.

Within 40 minutes, firefighting units brought all fires under control. Two men were killed. One man, who was closing up for the day at a similar nitroglycerin unit about 200 feet away, was hurled several feet through a doorway, suffering shock and a sprained thumb. Three hundred others escaped injury.

Ironically, news of a similar explosion at the Hercules Powder Plant in Kenil, New Jersey, had just been received. That blast took place in the nitro unit just four hours before the west coast explosion, killing three men.

Five years went by without incident. On February 12, 1953, at 12:53 P.M., workers in the dynamite ingredient storehouse known as the Dope House, were mixing chemicals. Suddenly, other workers smelled smoke and rushed to sound the fire alarm. All over the plant workers shut down their machines and rushed to the Dope House.

The Dope House had caught fire, as it did periodically. Usually the hoses were dragged in, the fire extinguished and repairs made. It was never anything too serious until this time. An explosion flung bricks, metal, wood and bodies in all directions. The men in the area scrambled for cover to protect themselves from the falling debris that rained down upon them, scattering burning fragments over a wide area. A metal crossbeam from the building landed in an upright position, stuck in the ground, glowing intensely with heat. Witnesses were shocked, horrified and frightened.

The smoking remains of the building were strewn everywhere with the bodies of twelve dead men. Limbs, torn from their bodies, littered the area. Moans from the injured rose from the rubble. One man was blown in half, his body lying across the lines overhead.

Despite their shock, the workers searched for the injured and tended to their medical needs until professional help arrived. Next came the chore of locating, removing and identifying the dead. The mortuary deputized the men and supplied them with bags in which to place remains for later identification.

One man remembered picking up two arms. "It was so bad that it didn't bother you at the time because it was unreal."

Twelve men were dead and many more injured or maimed. The survivors could not block out the bloody event. Men who had fought in battlefields of Europe and the Pacific remarked that the explosion site was as bad or worse than anything they had ever seen.

A survivor recalled, "Things like that make a man sick and I don't care how tough you are; you're just never tough enough to see something like that and pass it up."

Again, the FBI and Army Intelligence arrived to check for possible sabotage, even though only commercial explosives for mining and construction were manufactured at the time. In 1964, dynamite manufacturing was discontinued at the Hercules plant, after eighty-five years.

The Company had begun to change its focus from manufacturing explosives to manufacturing fertilizer, a transition that was completed in 1966. The fertilizer plant thrived for a decade. Then, mostly because of the difficulty and expense of controlling pollution, as well as a lack of up-to-date equipment, the plant was sold in 1976 to Valley Nitrogen Producers. After some serious labor disputes, and a drought that caused farmers to cut back on their use of fertilizers, the plant was shut down in November of 1977. A group of investors called Hercules Properties, Ltd. Purchased the property in 1979.

The 1980s were a time of massive transition. Developers had discovered the dormant little company village, and new neighborhoods began to sprout up all over town. Hercules was rapidly becoming a bedroom community, with people leaving town every morning and returning in the evening.

In 1983 Hercules installed the first of many traffic signals. There soon were shopping centers and gas stations, dry cleaners and video stores, restaurants, banks and real estate offices. The population grew exponentially and the little town became one of the fastest growing cities in California.

Hercules also became well known for its diversity. It is what some have called "the face of California", with a rainbow of races, cultures and nationalities. As the differences are celebrated, the similarities are embraced at the Hercules Cultural Fair, an event that has become an annual tradition. The springtime festival is held in beautiful Refugio Valley Park. Various ethnic and all-American foods are consumed while strolling amongst the tents of numerous crafts people and enjoying the variety of entertainment representing a myriad of nations, their customs and traditions.

Twenty of the 80 Company houses from the "Village" were rescued from abandonment and eventual destruction and moved into Bay and Santa Fe Streets to create a historic neighborhood. The homes were painstakingly restored, maintaining such original details as baseboards, moldings and wood floors and retaining original details of the Queen Anne and Colonial Revival styles. Kitchens were modernized and second bathrooms added. Plumbing and wiring were brought up to code but light fixtures and wash basins still replicate turn-of-the century styles.

The restoration won a national award in 1986, and a Western regional award the following year. The homes are on the National Register of Historic Places and a brass plaque adorns each one, attesting to its history. In 1987 the homes were offered for sale at \$240,000 to \$285,000, prices that would have amazed the folks who once rented them for \$10 per month (including utilities)! The Historic Homes neighborhood became the inspiration for the new developments that were destined to spring up around it years later.

The Northshore Business Park is home to such businesses as the Corporate Headquarters of Bio-Rad and the administrative offices of Mechanics Bank. Numerous doctors, dentists and other professionals occupy offices on Alfred Nobel Drive.

A transit center was created at the corner of Sycamore and San Pablo Avenues. Westcat buses began to crisscross the city, destined for neighborhoods with nicknames such as The Birds, The Trees and The Gems, so called because of street names like Pheasant, Redwood and Turquoise. AC transit buses travel to neighboring cities.

As the population grew, along with a need for city services, the Civic Center was constructed, encompassing Council Chambers, administrative offices, Police Station and Senior Center.

The 1990s saw further residential development as well as new facilities such as the Swim Center, which, in addition to an Olympic-size swimming pool, also houses indoor space used for basketball, classes, and public and private events.

The much-anticipated Hercules Middle/High School opened in 2001, providing the next step in education for local students as they were promoted from the various elementary schools.

At the turn of the 21st Century, a "Charette" was established to create a plan for the further development of Hercules. The idea was to balance the creation of a modern city with all the expected and necessary amenities and services while at the same time maintaining the small town charm and historical integrity of the old city. Hercules Council and staff, along with professional planners and developers invited residents of the town to attend workshops in which input was encouraged, "wish lists" were listened to, questions were answered, and suggestions and tentative plans were offered.

The results are taking shape today. The bay side of San Pablo Avenue, which housed the Powder Plant, has become a nationally recognized model of the "New Urbanism". The new homes co-exist harmoniously with the historic homes area. The neighborhoods look like they could have existed in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century. There are Italianate, Victorian and Craftsman homes with alley-loaded garages. Some of the garages have apartments above them. The sidewalks are lined with picket fences and replicas of old-time gas lamps. Neighborhood parks beckon parents and children to relax and enjoy the beautiful weather. There are live-work buildings with housing atop commercial spaces.

There are plans for a new school in the area, and a pedestrian friendly "down-town" with shops, restaurants, and family friendly paths and seating

areas. An Amtrak station is planned for the near future. A ferry terminal is on the drawing board as well.

On the other side of the Northshore Business Park is the neighborhood of Victoria-by-the-Bay, which has seven developments ranging from affordable apartments to single family homes reaching to over a million dollars. No matter who you are or what your budget, there is a home for you in Hercules, whether you are young and single, upwardly mobile career families or senior citizens, and every configuration in between.

Hercules has grown and changed. It has a Home Depot and a Starbucks. Just up the road from both, a brand new library is nearing completion. This former company town, which not so long ago numbered 100 residents, is now closing in on 25,000 - and still growing! But fortunately some things do stay as they were.

The Fernandez Mansion still stands with grace and dignity, surrounded by tall trees, just as Bernardo built it.

The Ellerhorst Farm is still a working farm, offering a quiet respite in spite of a busy freeway about a mile away. Old Town Pinole has kept some of the older charming buildings and homes as well, and there is an Ellerhorst School.

Today families in Hercules constitute a rich mix of many heritages who live side by side; no longer isolated as the Chinese were in the early days of Hercules.

Some towns just happen - no excitement, no special or interesting history. Hercules is not that kind of town. IT has an interesting and exciting history ... and a future.

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