



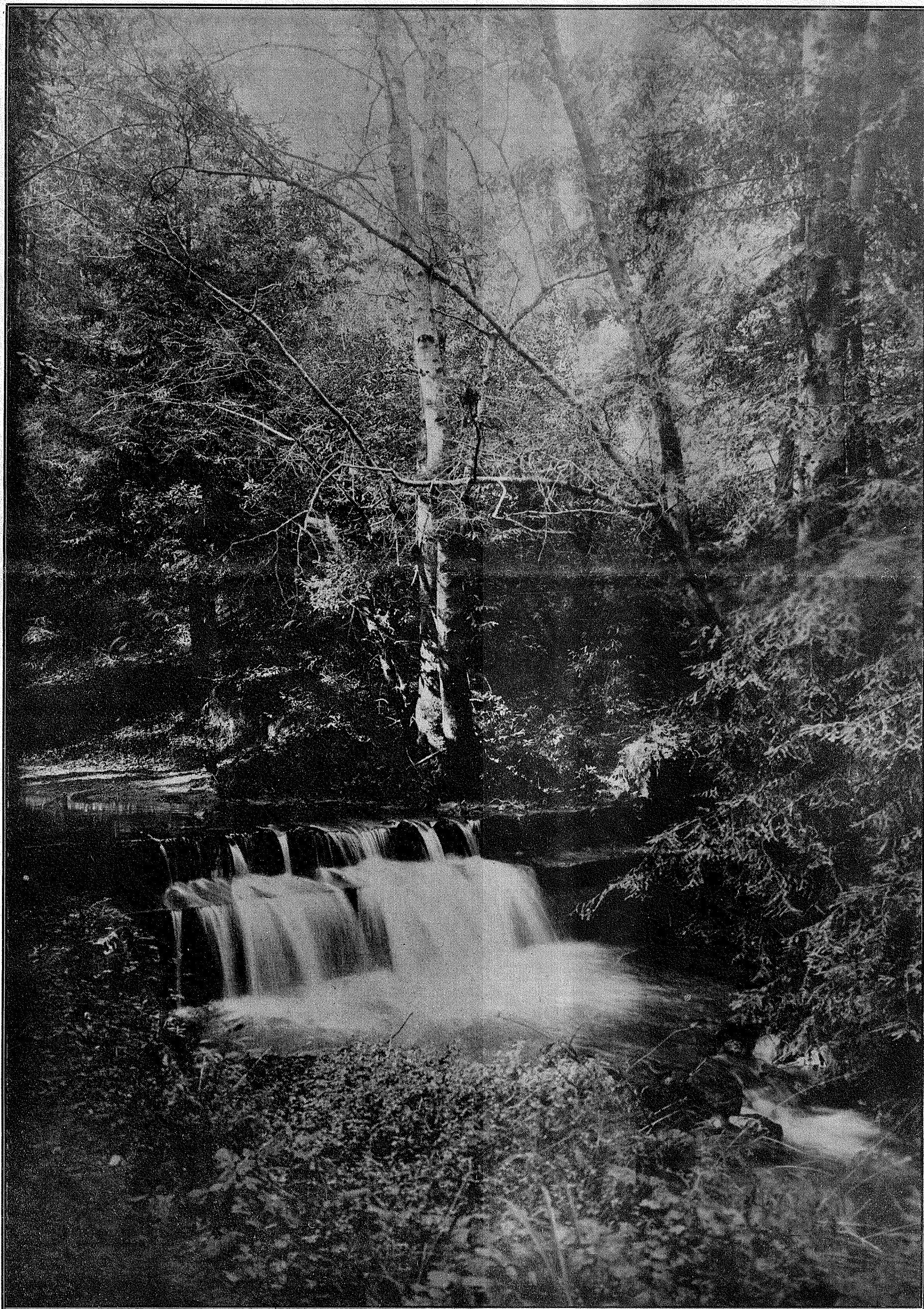
the Country Almanac

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the independent newspaper for Woodside, Portola Valley, Sharon Heights, Atherton, Ladera, Stanford Hills, Skyline, and

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Bear Gulch Creek runs full over the diversion dam in this 1921 photo—courtesy of Bill Nahmens [see page 3 story on the reservoir and its keeper]

Farming, fishing, moonshine, open space ... *Bill Nahmens remembers*

"Every morning I used to have to get up and milk those danged cows...In those days a good Holstein heifer brought \$50 to \$100...that was good money."

Does that sound like another world...long ago, far away and illustrated by Norman Rockwell?

Not so. It is Bill Nahmens reminiscing about growing up in Portola Valley in the 1920's and 30's. Mr. Nahmens, who manages the Bear Gulch Reservoir and Watershed for the California Water Service Company, is one of five generations of his family who have lived in South San Mateo County spanning a period of almost 120 years.

His grandfather came to Portola Valley about 1860 to raise strawberries, and his grandchildren are attending Redwood City and Las Lomas schools and Woodside High School.

Bill Nahmens himself grew up as a farm boy in Portola Valley before settling in to another kind of farming career—harvesting drinking water from the 1200-acre Watershed in the hills between Huddart and Wunderlich Parks. He also remembers chopping wood, catching steelhead in local streams, riding to school at Portola Valley's Little Red Schoolhouse, competing in friendly neighborhood rodeos, picking and drying prunes, breaking and training horses, and occasionally joining a round-up over on the Coastside.

"It's a whole different world now," Mr. Nahmens commented. Back when there were only about 20 families in Portola Valley, "Everybody knew everybody. When there was sickness or someone needed a helping hand, people were concerned to help each other out." He added, "There were more parties, too—barbecues and rodeos to get everyone together."

The biggest change Mr. Nahmens has seen is the disappearance of open space. "The thing I remember is the open space," he said. "Whenever we wanted to go somewhere, we would jump on a horse and ride. We never saw a 'No Trespassing' sign. It's hard to lose the welcome privilege of open space over the years. I think that is the biggest change."

When young Bill Nahmens was growing up in the Valley, people depended for their livelihood mostly on small farming and the big estates. His father leased 800 acres on upper Alpine Road and paid the rent by providing cordwood for stoves and fireplaces. In addition, Bill and his brothers and sisters helped with all the duties that kept the old-fashioned farm going. "We'd buy and raise calves and sell them back to the dairies...We raised bull calves for baby beef and sold them to Liddicoats (who ran the slaughterhouse at Arastradero and Page Mill Roads)...We'd break colts and sell them for saddle horses...We also had

several teams and did plowing and hauling...We picked and dried prunes...Also raised pigs."

"But mostly, we depended on working on the big estates...Schilling and Folger and Fitzhugh," Mr. Nahmens went on. Besides plowing and hauling, "This time of year they would hire 15 or 20 people to spade in the gardens." And the children, such as young Bill, would be hired to weed the lawns.

They may not have lived high, but somehow, "There was always a variety of things to do," he said. "If one didn't make money, something else would."

Mr. Nahmens remembers riding, or walking, or even riding on his brother's motorcycle to Portola Valley School—both the Little Red Schoolhouse which is still standing and another building since torn down. Ironically, when he was in second grade, the school was almost closed down because of declining enrollment and the students forced to move to Woodside. But then a new family with five school-aged kids moved into the area and the school was saved. Even so, there were seven in Bill's class when he graduated from eighth grade. He went on to Sequoia High School where he graduated in 1937 in a class of over 200.

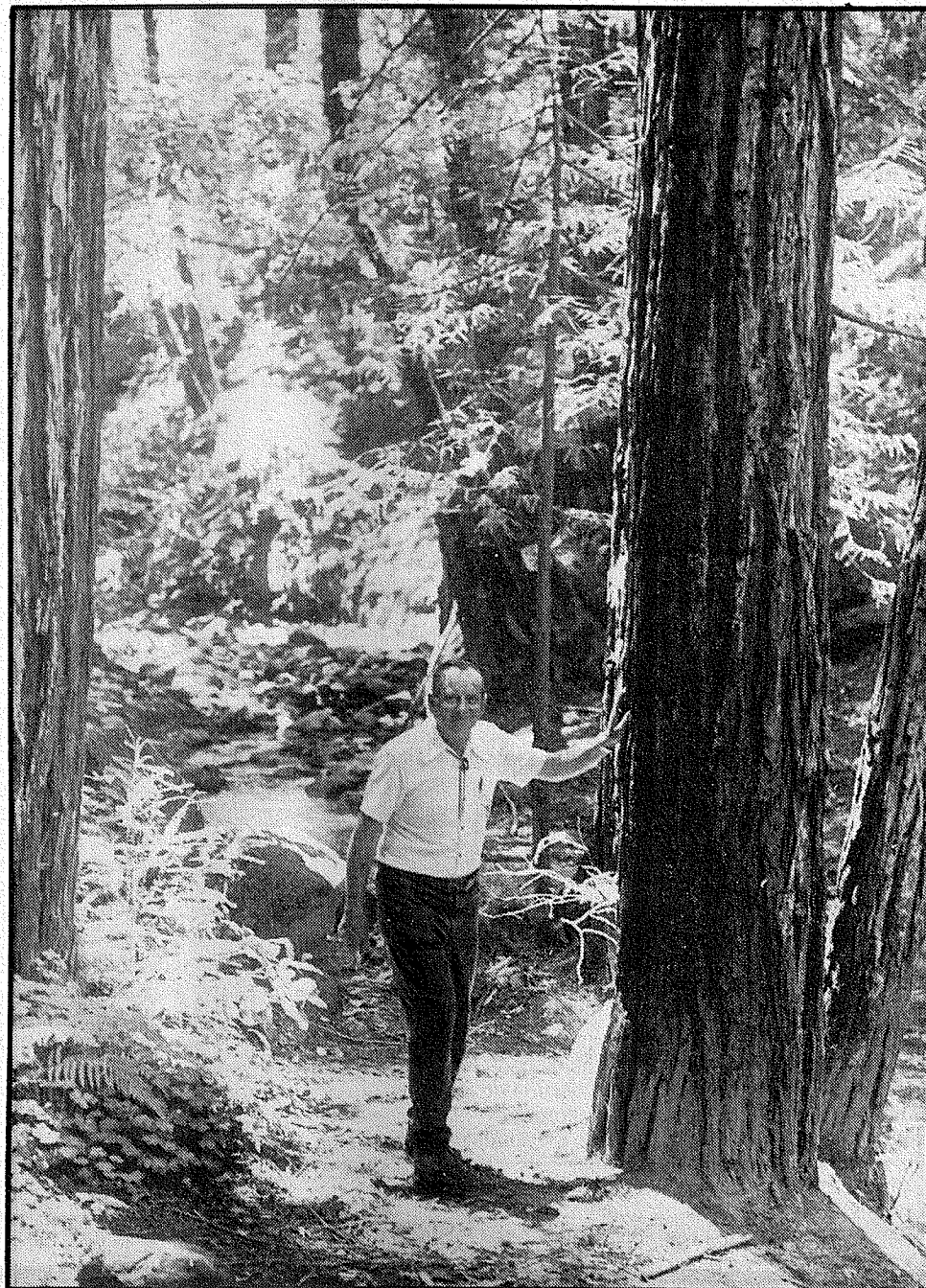
Some other recollections: gathering coal in a gunnysack in Corte Madera Creek below Coal Mine Ridge, which was named for an unsuccessful coal mine operated by some Russians in the last century; hunting and fishing for steelhead in local creeks; school plays and school picnics at the Morshead Lake.

Each summer, each ranch would have a get-together—a small rodeo, a Saturday night dance to the Victrola, and often a drinking contest among the men fueled by a five-gallon can of whiskey from the stills in the nearby hills.

Those were the good old days of prohibition, and making booze in the creeks and canyons was a thriving local business. Local sources at the time estimated there were nine stills in the curve of hills running from the Stanford golf course around to Redwood City, according to Mr. Nahmens. "They were caught pretty often, but if you knew the right person, you could always get a bottle," he commented. Young Bill spent many happy hours in Belmont's blacksmith shop across Whiskey Hill Road from the old Pioneer building in Woodside while his dad passed the time of day in Mathisen's saloon.

His favorite memory of prohibition involved the family pigs. The pigs ran loose, and one day a sow and her piglets foraged onto a neighbor's ranch where the used mash from a still had just been dumped.

Continued to page 24



Bill enjoys hiking in the Bear Gulch Watershed. Photo by Marion Softky.



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Water—harvesting an important local crop

Imagine living on a 100-acre estate in Atherton with a 28-acre lake and, just three miles away, 1200 private acres of forested hillside.

The land is the Bear Gulch Watershed and Reservoir of the California Water Service Company. The lucky resident is Bill Nahmens, who manages the water system and has lived on the reservoir property for 25 years.

After two years of drought, it was a welcome sight to see the reservoir filled to the brim with 215 million gallons of water. The Bear Gulch Reservoir and the watershed which feeds it provide approximately 10 percent of the water consumed by the communities of Woodside, Atherton, Portola Valley, parts of Menlo Park and nearby unincorporated areas. The other 90 percent of the water is provided by San Francisco's giant Hetch Hetchy water system which pipes most of it down from the Sierra.

Water managers, such as Mr. Nahmens, speak of the "water crop" as if it were hay or corn. So far this year more than 616 million gallons of water have been harvested from the Bear Gulch Watershed, according to Mr. Nahmens. This is 1200 acres filling the hillside between Wunderlich and Huddart parks. This water is diverted from Bear Gulch Creek a little way above Woodside Road and piped three miles to the reservoir near the western boundary of Atherton. The lake is down to about 193 million gallons now and will probably drop to about 5 million by the end of the season.

Mr. Nahmens estimated this year's crop will total about 640 million gallons compared to an average yield of about 500 million. Last year, the yield was less than 40 million gallons, Mr. Nahmens commented.

This year's water use figures suggest people may have learned the lesson of the drought. According to Mr. Nahmens, water use over a recent hot June weekend was 13 million gallons per day for the district. Before the drought it would have been 17 or 18 million, he noted. The water company and the county water plan, now in the final

stages of adoption, both stress the need for long term conservation of water.

This year the water company has put its new filter plant into operation. Built to meet state requirements to filter all water, the new plant passes four million gallons of water a day through filters of course gravel and anthracite before storing it for distribution to local taps. Actually the new plant was completed last year, but it was not until this spring that there was enough water in the reservoir to start operating it, Mr. Nahmens noted. The filtration plant now consists of an impressive array of large tanks and control consoles—a far cry from the old days when, according to Mr. Nahmens, they used to add chlorine by means of a 12-gallon crock and an alarm clock.

The Bear Gulch Water system has long been part of the local scene. The first dam was built on Bear Gulch Creek about 1860 by millionaire James Flood, who needed the water to irrigate his estates in what is now Menlo Park and Atherton. According to Mr. Nahmens, a new dam was built in 1889. By 1930, the basic system was complete when the reservoir dam was raised to its present height. Also in 1889 Cora Flood donated the whole system and its watershed to the University of California which sold it to the California Water Service Company in 1935.

Actually Mr. Nahmens is the second member of his family to work on the watershed. His father worked there for the University of California from 1889 to 1901. Mr. Nahmens remembers that it used to be a popular project to have university students survey the boundary of rugged watershed. "I think everybody got a different answer," he remarked.

Mr. Nahmens is almost two people—the friendly, knowledgeable water engineer and the nature lover. As local manager for the water company he watches over the complex system of pipes and valves and pumps, oversees the crews that stand ready to fix leaks or deal with problems 24 hours a day, and negotiates with local developers and governments to assure adequate water for new homes and



Bill Nahmens, local manager for the California Water Service Company and one of five generations of Nahmens living in the area. Photo by Marion Softky.

businesses. As nature lover, he enjoys watching the wildlife on the reservoir site and hiking in the redwood forests of the watershed.

Last year, 3000 or 4000 ducks wintered at the reservoir. Mr. Nahmens reported his grandson at Woodside High School did a duck counting study for school credit. "Also a pair of eagles winters here; you can see them around the lake," he said.

The vegetation both at the reservoir and in the steep forests of the watershed appears thick and luxuriant with hardly a suggestion of last year's drought. "I have a feeling that Mother Nature gave everything a rest last year," Mr. Nahmens commented. "This year everything is growing twice as fast as normal."

Higher in the watershed, Mr. Nahmens enjoys getting away from the crowds and hiking in the redwood forest. The tall trees were logged about a hundred years ago, and here and there one can see reminders

of earlier activity in what now appears to be complete wilderness. There is the deserted glade where Pete Early, a former lumberman who gave his name to a steep turn on Bear Gulch Road, once had a cabin. Suggestions of old logging roads wind through the woods, and once in a while a piece of rusted machinery or old utensils lie half buried—but most artifacts have long since been cleared out by souvenir hunters. Mr. Nahmens remembers once finding an old moss-covered logging bridge high in the canyon and sitting by it for an hour.

The day we walked in the Watershed, we saw a flight of millions of bugs, glinting in the sunlight as they drifted and flitted down the canyon. Mr. Nahmens identified them—a migration of ladybugs leaving their winter hibernation grounds and flying down the hill to feed on the juicy aphids and pests in Woodside and Atherton.

By Marion Softky

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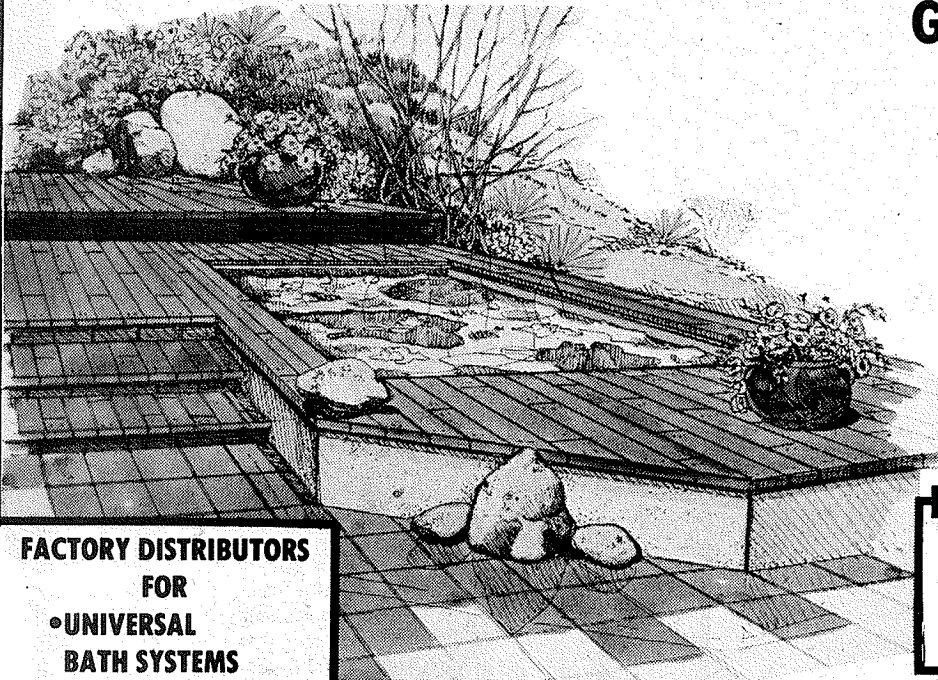
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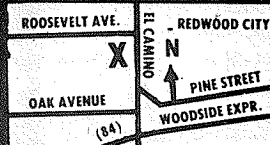
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Nahmens

Continued from page 3

"They came back drunk. The sow fell off the bridge into the creek," and the piglets hunting for apples in the orchard would miss them by a foot or so.

Mr. Nahmens first love was horses. By the time he was a young man, he had six to eight colts which he was breaking and as many mares. Commenting on the current love affair between boys and cars, Mr. Nahmens said, "In those days nobody could afford a car; so horses were the thing."

Mr. Nahmens traces his roots back past more than 100 years of Portola Valley to his grandparents on the island of Wyk between Germany and Denmark. His grandfather—a shipbuilder—left Wyk for political and religious reasons and shipped around the Horn to California. At the height of the mining boom, he worked in Virginia City building equipment for the Comstock and other mines. Eventually after work in the mines petered out, he found his way to Portola Valley where he farmed 28 acres of strawberries with the aid of Chinese labor and raised his family.

Mr. Nahmen's father was born on the sailing ship and lived all his life in the local area. He used to ride a bicycle from Portola Valley to San Jose to court his future wife and young Bill's mother.

Bill Nahmens' "Uncle Bill" was also employed locally—as postmaster to Dr. Tripp, who ran the old Woodside Store which still remains as a county park and landmark. His uncle died a few years ago at the age of 96.

When World War II came, Mr. Nahmens had to sell his horses to join the service. With time out for the war, he has worked for the water company 38 years. He has managed the reservoir and watershed

for 25 of those years with the marvelous fringe benefit of living on the 100 acre reservoir site in Atherton.

"It was a wonderful place to raise kids," he said. His three sons still live in the area. One is in the pest control business, one is a fireman with the Woodside Fire District, and one just graduated from the University of Santa Clara. Mrs. Nahmens, who was born in Germany, is active in local senior citizen groups and acts as tour guide on some of the trips.

The Nahmens already have their retirement home—a 320 acre ranch in Mendocino County, where they spend many of their vacations looking for Indian artifacts.

On his most recent vacation, Mr. Nahmens admits, with a glint in his eye, finding a stream with 12 and 15 inch trout.

By Marion Softky