

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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On Whiskey Hill

For the readers of the Diary who have motored through Freedom and mused on the source of the name of this small community between Watsonville and Santa Cruz, we have found an interesting story. Freedom might have been called Juliet. But that sad fate was escaped on the night of June 2, 1877.

On the above date a group of residents met and decided to change the name of Whiskey Hill – a name which had been given to the place before it began to cool off – to something which would have a more beautiful sound and meaning.

The original spelling was “Whisky”, and the appellation had been forced upon them by strangers. The residents wanted something more genteel.

So they met in the school house on the night of June 2, and J.S. Drew was selected as chairman. Three names were proposed – Freedom, Juliet and Smithville. One P. Smith is listed as attending the meeting, and the last suggestion may have come from him or from admiring friends also present. The issue was put to a vote. Freedom got 10 votes, and Juliet and Smithville tied with two votes each.

“Freedom having received a majority of all the votes, was duly declared the name of Whiskey Hill with cheers”, according to the news story in the Watsonville Register of that date.

Just who suggested Juliet is not known. But J.M. Nistetter, father of the first white family to settle in Freedom proper, long afterward claimed the honor of proposing the name

The Nistetters came to Whiskey Hill in 1864, when the community was a collection of a dozen shacks, each of which had a bar to entertain the Mexicans and Indian vaqueros from the surrounding ranches.

The sen[i]or Nistetter set up a blacksmith shop and made his livelihood shoeing the mules and horses of the teamsters who stopped on the road to Santa Cruz, and by selling tools to the lumberjacks who worked on the nearby stands of redwood.

Whiskey Hill was where the cowboys blew off steam, and their amusement was violent, according to reports. On Sundays they held races along the banks of Corralitos creek, where Holohan road was later built.

When the races palled, they moved up to Joaquin Castro's bullpen, which stood where Roache road now enters Freedom. There the more daring of the cowboys would have a bout with “el toro”. For variety they would let loose in the pen a bear or a mountain lion, so the story is told, and let the animals fight it out.

The high spot of the week were the Saturday night “dances” at the Whiskey Hill saloons. The most notorious of these was kept by one Joe Guiterez, reputed to have had 5 wives and 35 children, according to the Register reporter.

A big day in the community was September 18, when the inhabitants celebrated Mexican Independence Day. The giant fiesta was climaxed by the selection of “Goddess of Liberty”.

But the “civilization” of Whiskey Hill would not be stopped. In time the old Spanish grants were broken up by debts and death. The vaqueros had no more cattle to round up, and they moved away. The dance halls and the saloons were closed up. The community became a trading center for the small homes and ranches that sprang up around it.

Freedom was a good name to live up to.