

The merchant of Sonoma

sub: How Jewish settler shaped city's early history

June 99 mag

By Neal Ross

To many modern Sonomans, Schocken Hill may be a curiously-named leftover of the last century - the site of a once-thriving quarry at the northern end of Second Street East.

But the 658-foot hill owes its title to a man who originally had no interest in the rock business - and who, shortly after arriving in Sonoma, was twice arrested for opening his shop on a Sunday.

Short, red-headed Solomon Schocken was born to Jewish parents on Dec. 25, 1842 in Rosasen, a town in Prussia-occupied Poland. Little is known about his European life - and in the absence of diaries or letters, little is also known about his personality. But according to a 1982 outline by then-Sonoma resident Michael K. Shainsky, around 1862 Schocken arrived in New York, where he found employment as a baker.

Unlike many Jewish immigrants of the time, however, Schocken didn't stay in New York very long. Working his way to San Francisco as a baker on a German sailing vessel, Schocken jumped ship - and began peddling goods to California's miners, including those in Sonoma County.

Driven either by wanderlust or an eye for new opportunities, in 1864 the young man sailed to Honolulu, where he spent three years at a restaurant: first as waiter, then as owner.

But 1867 found Schocken back in the Golden State, clerking at a general store in the Napa County town of Monticello. In September 1871 he became a United States citizen in Napa City, and married Austrian native Dora Baer two and a half months later.

Schocken moved to Sonoma in the autumn of 1873, and "almost immediately opened a general merchandise business in the Toscano Hotel," according to a 1975 Sonoma Index-Tribune article by local historian Robert Parmelee.

Not long afterward, Schocken ran afoul of Sonoma's prevailing religious and economic climates. As recounted by Henry Cerruti, who visited Sonoma extensively in 1874:

"Being a sharp businessman, (Schocken) soon obtained the greater part of the trade of Sonoma, greatly to the discomfort of the other merchants, who with an envious eye watched the growing popularity of the diminutive Jew and his coquettish wife. On several occasions they tried to undersell him, but to no purpose - Schocken always stood his ground. Finding at last that they could not compete with him in a business way, they unearthed the law which requires stores to be kept closed on Sunday."

As a Jew, Schocken saw no reason to close his shop on the Christian Sabbath. A complaint was sworn out, and Schocken was arrested and fined ten dollars.

The next week, Cerruti wrote, Schocken - apparently figuring that local authorities only wanted him to shut down for any Sabbath, not a specific one - kept his store closed on Saturday and opened it on Sunday. He figured wrong, however; police arrested him the following afternoon.

"He pleaded as an excuse that he kept the Sabbath as prescribed by his religion," Cerruti wrote. "Those words had hardly been uttered when the Justice of the Peace howled: 'Damn you, do you wish to transplant Jerusalem to Sonoma? Mr. Clerk, please collect a fine of twenty-five dollars from the prisoner, and if he be ever again brought before me on a charge of this kind he shall be sent to prison.'"

Despite the setback, Schocken's business apparently boomed during the next few years - in June 1878, Schocken purchased the Barracks and surrounding land from General Mariano Vallejo and his wife Benicia, for \$2500 in gold coin.

The adobe building was remodeled with a wooden facade, long balcony and bar window. Schocken lived in the upper story, above the first floor storage and rental space.

Almost a year later, in May 1879, the grand opening of "S. Schocken - General Merchandise" was held. Schocken stocked a wide variety of goods including groceries, tobacco, feed, kerosene and wine, carrying a large volume and offering his wares at low prices. "By reinvesting profits, rarely buying on credit, and selling goods other Sonoma merchants would not stock, Schocken's store was successful for over 31 years," Shinsky wrote.

An advertisement in the Sonoma Index's Christmas 1879 edition lists some of Schocken's stock in trade: "SCHOCKEN'S New Store, Northeast Corner of the Plaza ... Keeps a Fine Assortment of Groceries and Provisions, Furnishing Goods, Dry Goods, Clothing, Boots and Shoes, Hats and Caps, Notions and Cutlery, Tobacco, Tinware, Hardware, Teas of All Kinds, Flour, Feed, Etc., Etc., Etc. Constantly on hand. Agent for the CAL. SPOOL SILK CO. The only Agency in town. Agent for the CAL. HOME MUTUAL INS. CO."

The following January, Schocken was initiated into the local Masonic lodge - a relative rarity for Jews of the period. Schocken was also active in Sonoma's civic life; apparently a lifelong Republican, in September 1883 he was elected to Sonoma's Board of Trustees (precursor to the modern City Council). He lost an 1884 re-election bid, but regained his trusteeship in 1892 for a four-year term.

In July 1881, Schocken purchased the Mission San Francisco de Solano from the Catholic Church for \$3,000 in gold coin. He used the ex-chapel as a hay and goods warehouse for more than 20 years, finally selling it to the California Landmarks League in 1903.

But it was in the late 1880s that Schocken acquired 69.5-acre Schocken Hill (nee Battery Hill), immediately to the east of the Upper Mountain Cemetery. Having leased the site as a quarry in 1886, he bought 62 acres outright in July 1888 from Catherine Miles for \$2,250. An additional 7.5 acres was bought for \$375 from Rachel Snyder in 1892.

Schocken's quarry employed a number of local Italian and Swiss immigrants, "some of whom became and whose descendants still are leading citizens of Sonoma" Parmelee wrote. The basalt blocks quarried there - between one and 20 feet in cross section - wound up as paving stones in Petaluma, San Francisco and San Jose.

The California State Mining Bureau Bulletin's 1906 edition called Schocken's endeavor "the largest quarry being operated in the vicinity of Sonoma ... About ten men are at work getting out gutter rock and paving blocks, and they average about 10,000 blocks a month."

Schocken's businesses were doing well, but his personal life apparently wasn't - he divorced Dora, his wife of 20 years, in 1893. However, Dora may have left her husband some years earlier - one account found at the Depot Museum says the "cultured, high-class woman ... lived in Sonoma a rather short time after their marriage. She didn't like life in a small, rural town so left Schocken and returned to Austria." Schocken married German native and widow Clara Handel in 1897.

The quarry - one of several in the hills above Sonoma - soon became so successful that Schocken decided to build an electric, rock-moving railroad between the hillside and San Pablo Bay. The county Board of Supervisors approved the plan in 1904, but the idea, which dragged on for some years, eventually died from lack of funding.

Five years later, the quarry itself died, a victim of the automobile. Horses could get a good grip on the cobblestones paving San Francisco's steep roadways, but horseless carriages couldn't. Schocken, shrewdly sensing the coming change, sold the quarry in 1909 to the Natomas Consolidated Company "at a cost of many thousands of dollars," according to the Oct 9, 1909 Index-Tribune.

Schocken was himself a "heavy bondholder" in the \$25 million corporation, but apparently didn't share with it his take on the future of the crushed-rock and basalt-block industry. The same Index-Tribune article predicted that the business would be "pushed to the limit" by Natomas, employ more than 100 men and cause a genuine boom, as well as enable the electric railway to finally be built. But by 1910, the quarry shut down, and the hillside returned to pastureland.

That year also marked Schocken's retirement from the Barracks-based business. An item in the August 27 Sonoma Index-Tribune reported, "WILL RETIRE FROM BUSINESS. S. Schocken, Sonoma's Oldest and Most Successful Merchant, to Sell Out Owing to Ill Health" read the headline. "This step is taken on the advice of his physicians and the contents of his general merchandise store will be disposed of as a whole to the highest bidder ...

"Mr. Schocken has been engaged in the general merchandise business in his present location for over forty years ... (He) has been one of Sonoma's most active and successful business men and his retirement will create a void in local mercantile circles that will not be forgotten for a long time."

Between 1910 and 1932, Schocken rented space in the Barracks store to various merchants and grocers, as well as local clubs. He continued to live in Sonoma until the mid-1920s, then began spending more time in San Francisco - where his wife Clara lived, and where he owned a house and some two-dozen pieces of real estate. He died there on May 27, 1932, and is buried in the Hills of Eternity cemetery in Colma.

Schocken left no children, although his obituary on the front page of the June 3 Index-Tribune says "several relatives survive." But the final paragraph of his 1910 retirement story seems a fitting epitaph for Sonoma's first known Jewish settler, and maybe bears witness that time heals all wounds - at least, in the retail world:

"Upright and square in all his business dealings, Mr. Schocken has made a host of friends in this valley who will remember him always as the fairest merchant Sonoma has ever had."