

Shinn Family Contributions to the Community

by Jill M. Singleton

Pioneer agriculturalists and nursery owners, in 1856 James and Lucy Shinn were at the forefront of Alameda County early settlement after California statehood, before Niles the railroad town even existed. In 1867, President Andrew Johnson personally signed the deed of 150 acres of land to the Shinns.

Their first home was the Sim Cottage located near the gravel banks of Alameda Creek, not far from where Shinn Pond is today in Niles Community Park. These gravels supplied the new transcontinental railroad track bed and the construction of the new University of California at Berkeley. As the gravel extraction expanded, the Sim Cottage was moved to what is Shinn Avenue today.



Their children Charles Howard Shinn and Millicent Washburn Shinn grew up to be some of the first graduates of this new university and became famous for their pioneering publications in environmental and psychology fields respectively. Millicent was editor and Charles a journalist on agricultural topics for the San Francisco based journal "The Overland Monthly". Mount Shinn commemorates Charles Howard Shinn, recognizing his role as environmentalist alongside John Muir and as the first superintendent of Yosemite Park.

In 1890 the youngest son, Joseph Clark Shinn returned to the Shinn Ranch to take over the pear orchards and gravel pits from his father, the nursery having sold its stock in 1888 after almost two decades of supplying local orchards with plant stock. The legacy of the nursery years are evident in the exotic arboretum planted around the 1876 'Big House' or Shinn House as we know it today.

Joseph Clark Shinn was a pioneer for his generation, helping to shape the state legislation that allowed the creation of water districts, and then creating the first one in the state in 1913. He remained on the Alameda County Water District Board of Directors for over 27 years, a key force behind consolidating local water rights. He was also on the board for Washington Union High School for 10 years, president of the Alameda County Farm Bureau and trustee for the Niles Congregational Church.

He and his wife were proud to be trustees of the Niles Library Association; the 1928 Niles Library building itself a donation by the Ford family, an adjoining gravel operator. Joseph's wife, Florence Mayhew Shinn was active in starting health clinics, which later became Washington Hospital, was a founder of the Washington Township Historical Society and the Toyon Branch of the Oakland Children's Hospital.

As the surviving Shinn siblings, Joseph Clark Shinn and Millicent Washburn Shinn donated the land for the 1930 Veteran's Memorial Building in Niles. In 1930, pear orchards stretched all the way between the California Nursery Company holdings and the Niles Grammar School across the street. The school was also built on land previously owned by the Shinn family.

In 1962, Florence Mayhew Shinn donated the Shinn family home and surrounding gardens and farm buildings with the surrounding four and a half acres of land to the City of Fremont for a historical park. Shinn House opened in 1976, a Bicentennial Year accomplishment for the Mission Peak Heritage Foundation.

The Shinn family descendants continue to be involved in their Fremont heritage, including the recent support for maintenance of the arboretum and an exhibit area commemorating the accomplishments of Admiral Allen Mayhew Shinn, son of Joseph and Florence Shinn.

Winifred Bendel, writing about the 'Shinn Gift' in the 1962 News Register Publisher's Column, described the Shinn family's 'heritage of community love and service' and that 'always the Shinn hospitality was wide and gracious'.