

Hugo Marquez

From Get Out if You Can to Mayfair

The topic of naming places such as streets, buildings, rivers and lakes, it is a topic that many people don't think much about. One would think that most of the time places are named after a rich white capitalist who had owned the land, or a politician who had a role in the development of the land. While there is validity to that sentiment, it is also important to note that naming places is much more than naming it after a person. The name of a place can hold meaning as it can represent its history, cultural relevance, and legacy of the community that it resides in. With that being said, this paper will examine one particular neighborhood, the Mayfair Neighborhood of San Jose, California in the history of its name, its legacy, and demonstrate the significance of naming places.

When thinking about big cities here in California, it is understood that they all share rich histories in regards to their diverse population. California's top 3rd most populist city, San Jose, is a leading example in showcasing what it means to have a rich history in diversity. In the diverse city of San Jose, and what is considered to be the heart of Silicon Valley, exists a complicated yet inspiring story of its residents in a neighborhood known as Mayfair. With its history of being in the epicenter of both immigration from all parts of the world and hyper industrialization of Silicon Valley, it presents both a history of resiliency and a lesson in how the material conditions of a neighborhood affect the well being of the community.

The origins of the Mayfair neighborhood had long started before the United States had been established as it once was a settlement for the indigenous Thamien Ohlone tribe. The

federally recognized indigenous tribe had lived in the community for thousands of years before its colonization from Europe. Before its colonization, the Thamien Ohlone people were known to be the stewards of the land as their culture revolved around preserving their home. The Ohlone people had practiced planned burning of the landscape in order to foster healthy growth of plant life for the preservation of nature and to crop plant food such as seeds, berries, and nuts. (Cogswell, 2016). Along with stewardship, the Thamien Ohlone people were known to be peaceful people as they would freely interact with other Ohlone tribes (Cogswell, 2016). Unfortunately, the peace that the Thamien Ohlone people had fostered on their homeland would soon end with the colonization of the Spanish. During the 1800's the Spanish came over to the America's to colonize the land to build missions all throughout California, some of which were built in present day San Jose, where the Thamien Ohlone tribe were settled in. Although there aren't any explicit records of what happened to the Ohlone people, it is believed that they were subjected to slavery from the missionaries as they were forced to convert to Catholicism and build the missions themselves (Cogswell, 2016). Not only were the Thamien Ohlone people subjected to slavery but also had been targeted by disease. With the Spanish bringing in diseases such as smallpox over to indigenous land, it would play a major part in its colonization as it led to the near extinction of the Thamien Ohlone people. The colonization and the near extinction of the Thamien Ohlone people would soon play a major role in shaping how we see the Mayfair Neighborhood as the land would be under a eurocentric rule.

Jumping forward to the early twentieth century, we now look at early San Jose which had begun to rapidly industrialize due to the booming economy. Much of the city of San Jose during the 1900's had focused its job force into agriculture and food canneries, where workers would package food. Because of this economic boom, it had attracted many workers from all ethnic

backgrounds, many of whom were of lower income backgrounds. This had led workers from all over the state of California to move to the food cannery cluster in San Jose in hopes of economic prosperity. The most predominant ethnic group that have taken up the workforce of the canneries were Mexican Americans (Jackson, 2020). Through the jobs that the canneries provided, it allowed for many, but not all, workers to gain economic stability to buy a house and support their families. One of the most predominant packing houses that resided in San Jose during its cannery days was a dried fruit packing company known as the “Mayfair Packing Company”. This company which employed thousands of immigrant workers, most of whom were Mexican, resided in the downtown area of San Jose (2014). With all the economic boom, it had brought about rapid development within the city as the downtown and west part of the city had begun to have its road paved, buildings constructed, and schools built.

Although development was going on for the residents of early San Jose, this is where the disparity of resources and the environment had started in what would soon be the Mayfair community. For the lower income Mexican immigrant workers who came over to San Jose, they were not afforded the same opportunities in housing as the higher class workers that recently moved into the city. Because of the lack of resources afforded to them, the Mexican immigrant workers had all congregated into an unincorporated part of east San Jose. While much of early San Jose had been industrializing with its paved roads, buildings, and other assets of infrastructure that made communities healthy, it had not reached the Mexican American community. The disparity of resources between the east side compared to the rest of the city was apparent as at the time when one would visit east San Jose, they would see unpaved roads, underbuilt homes, and lack of public utilities such as plumbing and electricity. While the residents of downtown and west San Jose would come home to a nice suburban neighborhood,

the Mexican residents of the east side would come home to an underdeveloped and crowded neighborhood. With this disparity of resources, it has made the living conditions of the Mexican workers difficult to live in. One example would be from the travel to get to work, as the flooding from nearby creeks would block pathways to work and cause health hazards. Not only was the living conditions difficult from the lack of infrastructure, but the community was affected from high crime rates, police brutality, and low wages because of the lack of worker's rights from the cannery plants. Due to the undesired conditions of the neighborhood in the 1930's, the unincorporated land was nicknamed "Sal si Puedes", which in Spanish means "Get out if you can". This nickname was fitting as every person in early San Jose knew that neighborhood as an undesired neighborhood to live in. For a long time the Mexican American neighborhood was known by that name until the area was formally incorporated into the city later on.

With the unofficial name of the neighborhood being a slogan encouraging residents to leave the said neighborhood, it signified the general atmosphere of the community. As the neighborhood was made up of a low income Mexican immigrant population, the city of San Jose did not take any policy or structural change to address the needs of its residents whether it be food insecurity, lack of infrastructure, police brutality, lack of running water, or the toxins that came from the food canneries that would leak into the neighborhoods. The only people that could help the residents in "Sal si Puedes" were themselves. Because of the lack of a social safety net or any material help afforded to address the needs of the community, the general population were living in turmoil which made the slogan "Get out if you can" fit as the residents would hope for enough economic stability to escape their poverty. The residents of "Sal si Puedes" were also abused in the workplace as they were exploited for their labor with policies such as the dual wage system, where the minority immigrant workers were paid less than their White counterparts

despite doing the same work (De La Rosa, 2021). With abuse from not just the living conditions of the unincorporated neighborhood but also in the workplace, it had made many residents of “Sal si Puedes” live in despair. The exploitation of the immigrant workers would soon push them to demand for better working conditions.

From what seemed to be a grim situation, hope in improving the conditions of the “Sal si Puedes” had blossomed with the work of Cesar Chavez. The activist who would be one of the co-founders of the United Farm Workers labor union had resided in “Sal si Puedes” during the 50’s where he raised his children. In this setting he was able to see the mistreatment of the Mexican American workers in both the workplace and in the living conditions of the neighborhood. Seeing the injustices going on in the neighborhood and in the workplace, Chavez had organized eligible Mexican American voters to vote to have San Jose incorporate the neighborhood as part of the city and for the neighborhood to have better conditions by having proper infrastructure. Eventually with the work done by the neighborhood, led by Chavez, it showed the community the power that they had in their unity and activism as “Sal si Puedes” would be incorporated into San Jose in 1955. This would be a major turning point into the neighborhood of “Sal si Puedes” as it would soon get its official name. While this happened it is important to note that one of Chavez’s colleagues and a farmer labor rights revolutionary herself, Dolores Huerta, put a spin on the former name. Dolores Huerta, who had also been one of the co-founders of the United Farm Workers, came up with the famous slogan “Si se puede”. The phrase which translates to “Yes we can”, is a spin from the former nickname of the neighborhood, and would be the rallying cry of workers uniting for better working conditions. To this day, especially in the Mayfair community, the phrase “Si se puede” is still carried out in protests and unifying speeches from local activists. From Chavez’s stay in “Sal si Puedes” and

with the help of Dolores, they transformed the negative slogan into the iconic slogan of Latino empowerment known as “Si se puede”.

With the incorporation of what was once called “Sal si Puedes” into the city, the neighborhood got its name that only seemed fitting to its history. The name given to the newly incorporated neighborhood was after the dried fruit packing plant that had employed many of the residents, which was the Mayfair packing company. The Mayfair name was decided by the city council at the time the neighborhood was being incorporated. Although one person might see the naming of the neighborhood after a packing company, others see it as a symbolic gesture as the name represents the economic upbringing of the community as many of the first residents had worked there. Others see the name as the symbol of working class identity that the neighborhood holds. Some may also see it also as an inspiration to fight for the worker’s rights and to improve the living conditions of those marginalized. That being said, many community members are unaware of the history of the Mayfair name. For those that are familiar with the history of the Mayfair name, would criticize that the Mayfair company had no ties to the community that lived there during the cannery days other than its exploitation of the immigrant workers. Generally the Mayfair name often gets a bad reputation not because of the name itself but because of the fact that the neighborhood is of low income and a predominantly Latin- immigrant background. Along with the name being given, the neighborhood also had its infrastructure implemented as its roads would soon be paved, sewage system implemented, and running water installed. Through this name it stays to the roots of the neighborhood in what it once was and what it still is in its working class demographic.

As seen with the birth of the neighborhood, the history of Mayfair had been filled with sites of activism in terms of the living and working conditions of the residents, which lives on to

this day stronger than ever. There are many nonprofit organizations, unions, and mutual aid programs that reside in Mayfair that all have one thing in common, which is to help those marginalized and to improve the conditions of the neighborhood. Unfortunately despite the ongoing pushes of socioeconomic equality by local activists, the city just like in the infancy of the neighborhood still continues to ignore the needs of the community. The residents of the Mayfair community are some of the lowest income earners in all of San Jose and have the worst health outcomes. The inequality that had plagued the neighborhood since its infancy still lives on to this day. While the inequality still persists, it does not stop the activists in the community as they still continue to push for policies that help the community such as increasing for affordable housing to address the housing crisis, universal health care to address the disparity of health outcomes among wealthier and poorer communities, and reallocation of police funding to properly address the lack of infrastructure spending that goes on in the city.

Despite the inequity that still persists in the Mayfair community, the “Sal si Puedes” name and sentiment has been long gone as the spirit in activism needed to improve the material conditions of the community is alive and well. Mayfair’s legacy in activism is strong as it is the host site to one of San Jose’s most prominent non-profit organizations, SOMOS Mayfair. This particular non profit organization is well known for spearheading many activist campaigns to address the socio economic problems that affect the Mayfair neighborhood. Just like the neighborhood, the SOMOS Mayfair organization takes on the Mayfair mantle to take pride in its roots as a working class community. In fact, the word “somos” means “we are”. In the recent work that the organization has done was to push the city council to build more affordable housing in the city, as San Jose is becoming the most expensive city to live in all of the United States. With the work that the community has done through SOMOS Mayfair, they were able to

get the city to build more affordable housing for the neighborhood. Even though there is still progress to be made to meet the needs of the community, SOMOS Mayfair and the rest of the Mayfair community will continue to live on what it means to be the Mayfair neighborhood, a neighborhood that fights for positive change.

Along with being the home to many activists the Mayfair neighborhood is the home cultural hub known as Mexican Heritage Plaza. While on the surface the name serves to hold an obvious title for what it means in the diverse city of San Jose, its history and legacy gives reason to the cultural hub every San Jose native knows as the Mexican heritage plaza. It is the site that gave home to many activists and social change movements that led to progress we see today in San Jose.

After going through the history of the Mayfair name, I would like to offer my own reflection on what the name means to me. While I do appreciate that the community outgrew the name of “Sal si puede”, I do wish that the neighborhood was named after something that related to the community more than just the company that employed its workers. I would’ve loved to see the Mayfair community be renamed to the “Si se puede” or “Somos” community not only because of the spin on its first name, but because it fits with its history and legacy of activism. As mentioned before the community is the host of many local activist movements through SOMOS Mayfair and the various events at the Mexican Heritage Plaza. By renaming the neighborhood to either of those names, it sends a sentiment of empowerment and building for a better future.

From “Sal si Puedes” to Mayfair, the name of a neighborhood represents and holds the history and values of a community. With the change of the names of the neighborhood throughout the years, it also represents the attitude of the community as from what started as a

community of outcasts that reinforced their negative reputation as lower class workers had overtime transformed into a community that embraced its working class roots to empower workers of all backgrounds and civil rights of those that are marginalized. The legacy of the struggle that the neighborhood had faced from the “Sal si Puedes” days still lives on to this day as there is still socioeconomic inequality rampant in San Jose, but with it only inspires more young activists to speak up and against the injustices that not only affects the Mayfair community but communities around the world.

Revisions

The biggest things I needed to improve on in this paper was including a section that showed the negative perspective of the Mayfair name so that the narrative didn't seem one sided. Another revision that I have made was in the section that talked about Cesar Chavez, where I mistakenly forgot to attribute the “Si se Puede” slogan to famous worker activist, Dolores Huerta. I revised it by correctly attributing the slogan to her and talking briefly about her importance. The most common suggestion I received on improving my paper was improving the grammar and sentence structure, so I reread the essay multiple times and I did see that there were some awkward sentences. I fixed the grammatical errors that I made and made the sentences more concise so that the reading flowed smoother. The last thing that I incorporated was adding my own reflection on what the name means to me. Upon rereading the essay, I noticed that I didn't provide my own perspective and I feel that by adding it, the paper would feel more authentic.

Works Cited

Cogswell, N. (2016, November 2). *A Brief History of the Muwekma Ohlone People*. Culture Trip. Retrieved January 19, 2022, from <https://theculturetrip.com/north-america/usa/california/articles/a-brief-history-of-the-muwekma-ohlone-people/>

Jackson, J. H. (2020, April 7). *The San Jose Fruit Cocktail: Canneries, Civil Rights and the Birth of Silicon Valley*. Washington Square The Stories of San Jose State University. Retrieved January 20, 2022, from <https://blogs.sjsu.edu/wsq/2020/04/07/the-san-jose-fruit-cocktail-canneries-civil-rights-and-the-birth-of-silicon-valley/>