

RANCHO BODEGA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The History of the Union Hotel in Occidental

by Susan Teel - 2014

The region now known as Occidental, CA, was settled in the 1840's, 50's and 60's by farmers, cattle ranchers and loggers. William "Dutch" Bill Howard, who settled there in 1849, became the first permanent resident.

In October of 1876, the North Pacific Railroad was completed in Occidental and the town began to build up around it. The railroad's main function was to haul away the local timber to distant markets, but it also served as a lifeline, bringing workers, tourists and adventurers to Occidental. The town with its elevation of 560 feet was the highest point on the railroad.



On May 10, 1879, Dutch Bill Howard sold one of his lots, number 6, to Amelia Jones. Her family built what was later to become Union Hotel on the site. They sold the site back to Howard the following year. In 1891, he sold the building to Giovanni Gobetti and with wife Giovanna. They converted it to the Union Saloon and operated it for almost 35 years.

In 1925, Giovanna sold the Union Saloon to Carlo Panizzera. He turned it into the Union Hotel, which is still owned and operated by his descendants today. Carlo, born in Italy in 1889, immigrated to California where he worked as a cowboy in the San Fernando Valley for several years. Carlo moved to Occidental to join a cousin who lived there. When he bought the Union Saloon, he ran it as a boarding house and restaurant for stopover passengers from the railroad. One morning, a waitress he had hired, Mary Alberigi, was carrying a load of linens from the hotel rooms upstairs down the steep, narrow stairway to the floor below when she tripped and fell. Carlo found her, picked her up, and carried her to the doctor. They were inseparable from that day on and married on December 7, 1929 which was the year the railroad stopped and the boarding house closed. Mary gave birth to their only child, Lucille, in 1930.

In the 1930's, Mary's good home cooking had become legendary, and people drove long distances for dinner. Soon, more space was needed and a new dining room was opened on December 7, 1941, which coincidentally was also Pearl Harbor Day.

Lucille, who grew up in the family business, married Dan "Mahoney" Gonnella on November 6, 1949. They had five children, Michael, Mary Theresa, Mark, Daniel and Frank. Carlo died in 1977, and Mary died two years later in a tragic car accident. Lucille, Mahoney and their children were left to run the growing family business. The next generation of the Gonnellas added an outdoor courtyard in 1984, the bakery/café in 1988 and the Pizzeria in 1992. A second restaurant was built in 1995, followed by a third in 2006, both in Santa Rosa, CA.

As you wander through the rooms at the Union Hotel, lifelike portraits of the young Carlo and Mary hang over the door of the saloon near the steps of the old fateful staircase where they fell in love. The Gonnella family desires one to leave the Union Hotel; they feel more like part of the family than a guest.