

THE ALAMEDA ARCHITECTURAL PRESERVATION SOCIETY



www.alameda-preservation.org

August 2008

Alameda's Annual "Woody Walk"

Marcuse & Rimmel at Bay Station

Sunday August 17, 2:00 pm

Join historian Woody Minor's walking tour through Bay Station in the Northside, highlighting the Victorians of Marcuse & Rimmel.

Meet at Littlejohn Park: Pacific Avenue and Morton Street • Free to AAPS members and \$5.00 for non-members.

So Long, Old Foundry By Woody Minor

In June, one of our oldest industrial landmarks, the Van Niel Foundry, 2319 Clement Avenue, came down during its 89th year on the waterfront. The building was large (50 feet wide by 100 feet long) yet easily overlooked, so quietly did it fit into its waterfront setting. The gabled form and corrugated metal veneer were standard features of industrial design, with quaint monitors enlivening the roofline. I found the structure both picturesque and redolent with history: a strong contributor to our vanishing industrial waterfront.

Dow Pump and Engine Company, Clement Avenue and Oak Street, as it appeared soon after its completion in 1909 or 1910. From the booklet "Alameda, California," by the Southern Pacific Company and Sunset Magazine, 1911.



The Van Niel Foundry Company was founded shortly after World War I by Karel A. Van Niel, a foreman with the George E. Dow Pumping Engine Company. Established in San Francisco around 1880, Dow was the largest manufacturer of pumps in the

western United States, mainly for use in mines. The firm moved to Alameda after the 1906 earthquake, as the Estuary's shipping channels were being deepened for modern ocean-going vessels. Much of Dow's sprawling factory complex, built in 1909 at the northwest corner of Oak Street and Clement Ave., remains in place. It is the oldest industrial property in Alameda.

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During the World War I shipbuilding boom, Dow shifted the majority of its output to diesel engines, changing its name to Dow Pump and Diesel Engine Company. By 1919, the company had 600 employees. Karel Van Niel was the foreman in the plant's molding (casting) shop. He had moved to Alameda when the plant opened, residing with his wife, Florence, in the extant Colonial Revival cottage at 2243 Buena Vista, one of several houses on that block built for Dow foremen.

On June 5, 1919, the City of Alameda issued Van Niel a building permit for a "one-story foundry" on the north side of Clement Avenue east of Oak Street. The cited cost was \$4,300; the builder, an Oakland contractor named George A. Scott. The low cost of construction, comparable to a small single-family residence of the period, was a reflection of the structure's "no frills" design. Like most industrial buildings, it was designed to enclose maximum space at minimum cost. The wood frame was anchored to a concrete slab foundation. Columns extended down the center, reducing the need for hefty clear-span trusses. Walls and roof were clad in corrugated iron. Wood-sash window panels and skylights brought light into the cavernous interior, monitor vents helped rid the space of toxic fumes, and big sliding doors provided access. It probably didn't take long to erect and equip the structure, and it seems likely that the foundry was up and running by the end of the year.

City directories indicate that the Van Niel Foundry made brass, bronze, and aluminum castings. While we don't know who the foundry's clients were, the demand for such castings would have been strong among shipbuilders and engine makers. In 1919, there were several large shipyards on the Estuary, and three Alameda firms manufactured engines: the Union Gas Engine Company, Skandia Pacific Oil Engine Company, and Dow. The inference is that Dow, whose plant was virtually next door to the foundry, was Van Niel's principal client.

In 1926, the business was sold and re-named the Oakland Brass Foundry. Van Niel started a new foundry at the Dow plant, with George Dow as his partner. Under the name Van Niel Brass Casting Company, the foundry continued to produce brass, bronze, and aluminum castings through the 1940s. Following Karel's death in the late 1930s, Florence Van Niel kept the business going for another decade, closing around 1948. Meanwhile, the original Van Niel Foundry remained in operation through the 1950s as the Oakland Brass Foundry, finally disappearing from the phonebooks in 1960.

behind their new building, for parking and storage—including the old Van Niel Foundry Building.

The former Paceco office building on Blanding Avenue and the associated parcels on Clement Avenue were acquired in 2001 by another booming local business, Perforce Software. So the story has come full circle, from the arrival in Alameda of the Dow Pumping Engine Company, to the establishment of the Van Niel Foundry by one of its foremen, the acquisition of the Dow and foundry properties by Paceco, and advent of Perforce Software.



The former Van Niel Foundry and Oakland Brass Foundry, 2319 Clement Street, as it appeared shortly before its demolition in June 2008. (Photo by Valerie Turpen.)

In later years, the old Van Niel Foundry came under the ownership of the Pacific Coast Engineering Company (later known as Paceco), which took over the Dow plant in 1941. Paceco designed and built the world's first dockside container crane, for Matson, in 1958, helping inaugurate the modern era of container cargo handling. The company expanded along the Alameda waterfront between Oak Street and Park Street, erecting a new building for its corporate headquarters at 2320 Blanding Avenue. Paceco also bought property on Clement Avenue,

Perforce Software, after some time in the former Paceco facility, needed to expand. In doing so, the City required the company provide more employee parking, and the only way they could satisfy that requirement was with their other property holding, the Van Niel Foundry building.

When Perforce went through the process of getting a permit back in 2006 to expand the PACECO building, they were required by the City to tear down the old foundry to create more parking spaces.

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Annual Woody Walk

Strolling the Northside

Sunday 17 August, 2 p.m.–4 p.m.

Meet at Littlejohn Park: Pacific Avenue and Morton Street

Dust off your walking shoes—it's time for another epic stroll with Woody Minor. This year's walk takes us for the first time to the Northside, an area studded with residential and industrial gems. The focus will be Marcuse & Rimmel, Alameda's most prolific Victorian homebuilders. This partnership produced over 500 buildings in the Bay Area in the 1890s, most of them houses in Alameda. Since the firm's offices were at Bay Station, dozens of their Queen Anne and Colonial Revival cottages are on view in the Northside, such as the stupendous 30-house ensemble of the Bay Station Heritage Area. We will look at other landmarks along the way, including the commercial buildings of Bay Station and the magnificent Del Monte Warehouse. So come one, come all—you won't want to miss this introduction to one of Alameda best-preserved and least-known neighborhoods.

Free to AAPS members and \$5.00 for non-members.



*left & bottom: Marcuse & Rimmel cottages, 1300 block Pacific Avenue, 1895
top: Parapet detail, Del Monte Warehouse, Buena Vista Avenue
mid: Partial view of façade, Del Monte Warehouse*



Alameda Legacy Home Tour is Scheduled

Mark your calendars for Sunday, September 28, 11:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. to attend the 25th Alameda Legacy Home Tour. This year's event will feature homes from the Gold Coast to the West End, highlighting a mix of historical periods and architectural styles. Participants will partake of exterior charms, lush garden settings, and varied interiors in this offering of dwellings built between 1891 and 1929.

The tour is a fundraiser benefiting the Alameda Architectural Preservation Society and the Alameda Museum, and is sponsored by The Perforce Foundation. \$20 advance ticket vouchers are available at Thomsen's Garden Center, 1113 Lincoln Avenue; Urban Forest, 1201 Park Street; Daisy's, 1347 Park Street; and online at www.alameda-home-tour.org (available via PayPal). \$25 tickets are also available at Franklin Park on the day of the tour. For more information call 510-523-5907.

If you are interested in serving as a docent in one of the homes, please contact Diane by phone at 510-523-5907 or Robbie via e-mail at alamedahometour@netscape.net before August 31. Docents receive free admittance to the tour and are invited to the post-tour party.

Four of the six houses featured on the 2008 Alameda Legacy Home Tour



So Long, Old Foundry

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The Historical Advisory Board raised no objections, and local preservationists (including me) were silent.

"While I would have been more or less happy to leave the building as homage to times past, we needed the space for the city-required parking to support the expansion of our office space," Christopher Seiwald, the founder and CEO of Perforce, recently told me.

The building came down because no one spoke up for it. No one knew what it was.

How sad we all weren't more awake to the importance of the Van Niel Foundry, with its ties to the architecture and history of the waterfront. In retrospect, the building had evident architectural and historical significance, and would likely have been eligible for listing on the California Register of Historical Resources, the statewide standard for environmental review.

"Though I'm largely responsible for it, I too am saddened at the loss of the shed," Seiwald continued. "We used it for many an event, and I can't tell you the number of times people would come by with stories about the building. It seems to have

been a fixture in a number of people's lives over the years."

"No one at the city raised any objections over historical value. So the time of the shed was over. We did put in the extra effort and cost to salvage the wood, so that pieces of the building can live on in spirit. I wish there was a better plan we could have followed."

So do I. Let's try to pay closer attention next time, which reminds me: what about the old Dow Pumping Engine Company plant? It is an industrial property of far greater significance, the fish that spawned the foundry. And it is endangered.

GET INVOLVED AND MAKE A DIFFERENCE!

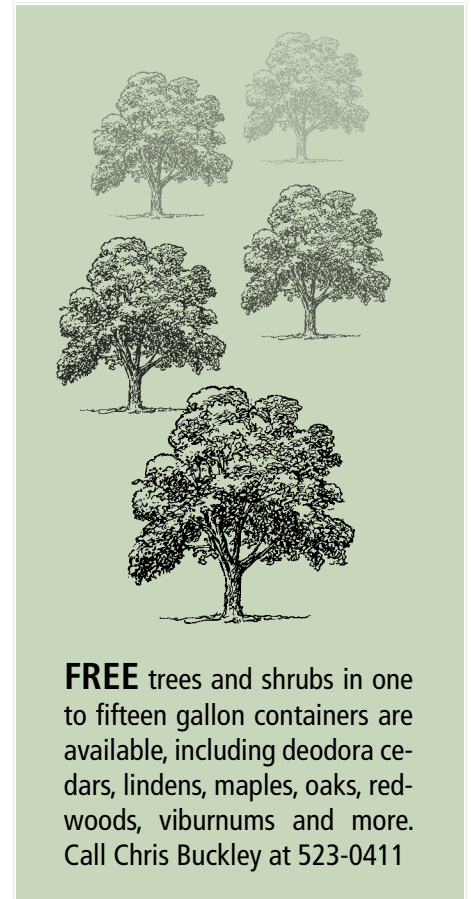
The Preservation Action Committee meets at 7:00 pm on the first Monday of each month to address issues important to the architectural preservation of the City of Alameda. Committee meetings are open to all AAPS members. If you would like to attend a meeting or would like more information, please call Chris Buckley at 523.0411. We are making an impact within the community. It's fun and informative. We encourage all members to get involved!



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*For more information, please contact:
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FREE trees and shrubs in one to fifteen gallon containers are available, including deodora cedars, lindens, maples, oaks, redwoods, viburnums and more. Call Chris Buckley at 523-0411

AAPS Newsletter Editor

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In this issue The Van Niel Foundry, Alameda Legacy Home Tour, Woody Walk—Strolling the Northside . . .

AAPS Membership Coupon

If you would like to join the AAPS or renew your membership, please send this portion back with your payment. Membership Chairperson Nancy Hird at 523.0825

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P.O. Box 1677, Alameda, CA 94501

AAPS SCHEDULE of EVENTS for 2008

Sunday, August 17, 2 pm
Alameda's Annual Woody Walk

Sunday, September 28
11am–5pm
Alameda Legacy Home Tour

Sunday, October 12
7 pm at the First Presbyterian Church
Bill Essert (Wooden Windows)
and his Wonderful Wooden
Window Machine