

History: Chef's daughter recalls life at Tallac Hotel

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One day, late in September, 1975, Mrs. Meier phoned to inquire as to the whereabouts of Gladys and Velma Comstock. Mrs. Meier explained they were her playmates during several summers she spent here 65 years ago. I seized the opportunity of Mrs. Meier's brief vacation to corner her into an interview. Pat Amundson and I spent a delightful October morning coaxing memories of her early childhood summers at Tallac House from Mrs. Meier. Mrs. Meier was here celebrating her 75th birthday with her husband, and daughter and son-in-law, Joan and Mike Leeches. So in addition to our visit, we enjoyed coffee and birthday cake.



Mrs. Meier was born Meliba Lorraine Vallet, one of three daughters of French Swiss Mother and Bordeaux Father, who immigrated here in the late 1800's. Louis Vallett was a chef with a grand reputation stretching from Phoenix, Arizona to Florida. His profession took him to the playgrounds of the wealthy, each by season, and necessitated long separations from his family. His wife's objections to these separations finally prompted him to ask Harry Comstock if he might bring his family to stay the summer at Tallac. Meliba's sister, Alice, stayed with Harry and Virginia Comstock and the remainder of the family were housed in an apartment near the kitchen at Tallac House.

Alice did a lot of sewing for Virginia Comstock, who Meliba remembers as a very pleasant woman, but quite sickly and in bed frequently. Harry Comstock is remembered as tall, with curly black and graying hair and quite distinguished looking.

He was very earthy and insisted upon being called "Harry" by everyone around him. Meliba and Gladys Comstock shared the same interests and were inseparable through the three summers she spent here. They specially enjoyed horseback riding and with the absence of trails and roads, enjoyed the young son of one of the nearby-camped Washo families as a guide.

Gladys and Meliba began "snitching" foodstuffs from the Hotel sideboard and trading for pinenuts with the Washoes. They were put on restriction when Mr. Vallett caught them. Meliba remembers an older woman named "Mary" who seemed in charge of the Waho encampment. Mary greeted the girls enthusiastically when they came to trade Meliba can best recall the Indians camped in two huge tents, probably a half-mile from the Tallac House. With the absence of roads, there was no landmark to better pinpoint their locations. The Washoes would come with huge baskets, filled with assorted smaller baskets, to sell at Tallac. Mr. Vallett was usually obliged to ask them to leave, which they did with no hint of offense.

Mrs. Meier remembers the trip from the family home in Los Angeles to Tahoe as beginning with the train ride to Truckee, then by stagecoach to Tahoe Tavern, finally by steam to the Hotel. The steamer brought passenger, mail and supplies every day. She also remembers the motor boat Harry Comstock bought to accommodate twelve to fifteen guests who cared to make side trips back to the Tavern. Although she recalled seeing stagecoaches in front of the Hotel frequently, Mrs. Meier said there were no road, hence no cars and she was too busy being a ten-year-old to take note of what other mode of travel the guests used and by what route they arrived. She did recall frequent guest came form the East Coast, but did not remember any visitor form foreign countries. The summer was passed in leisurely fashion, with fishing expeditions, boating, swimming and card games such as Bridge. Professional entertainment was brought into the huge ballroom for the guest who were seated about theatre style.

Queried about the fabled tents along the beach, Meliba had no recollection of them, though picnics were apparently frequent as her Father made up sumptuous lunch baskets for many of the guests. Teas was always served at 4;00 P.M. in what was known as the "side dining room", with finger sandwiches, cookies and pots of tea set out. Certain waitresses were honored with the tea-serving duty and wore all white, rather than meal-time uniforms of black and white. There was no organized child care provided, although the waitresses occasionally doubled as sitters when called upon, and were paid separately for this duty.

Mrs. Meier remembers Velma Comstock as a nature lover. Velma didn't join Gladys and Meliba in their wanderings, but preferred going into the forest, and with a wide range of whistle styles, calling the native birds near her.

Mr. Brockway was a frequent visitor to Tallac. Mrs. Meier remembers him as short and stocky with light colored hair. But he is best remembered as only a child could associate him, with offerings of candy with friendship.

Meliba's other sister, now Louise Maillot, was a waitress at Tallac, and now resides at Half Moon Bay on the California Coast, South of San Francisco.

Another found memory was of all flavors of soda pop made on the Tallac premises. Outstanding in Meliba's mind was her favorite, strawberry.

Mrs. Meier also remembers a power plant near a waterfall at Tallac. Although it probably supplied electricity to the Hotel, at ten she had no particular interest in its function. She recalls no heat in the Hotel rooms, but plenty of warm bedding. The lobby of the hotel had a large cozy fireplace.

After three memorable summers at Tallac, Chef Vallett accepted a position with Castle Hot Springs in Arizona. Meliba graduated from elementary school in Phoenix during the period,

before moving to San Diego.

Mrs. Meier believes she may have disposed of menus or any other memorabilia from Tallac during her last move from Los Angeles to Redondo Beach. However, she offered to check with her sister, Louise, for any items which might be of interest to the Society. She regretted that Alice is no longer living, as she was the oldest sister and had more intimate memories of Harry and Virginia Comstock.

– Linda Mendizabal