

## Louise Coffin

1858 - 1940

Mrs. Alonzo Coffin

Carolina Luisa Pregel was born on April 4, 1858 in Mexico, her father was from Austria, her mother from Germany. On both birth and baptismal records her name was recorded as Carolina Luisa, but by the 1900 census and ever afterwards, she was Louise.

We don't yet know why the family was in Mexico when Louise was born. Were they on their way to the US? We don't know when they did emigrate, but they were definitely here by the early 1880s because in 1883 Louise married a prominent San Franciscan, Alonzo Coffin, who owned California Pattern Works, a firm involved in home construction design. The Coffins participated in the 1890 auction, buying a lot on Throckmorton Avenue intending to build a summer home there. But in 1892 after being impressed by its sweeping views of San Francisco Bay, Alonzo bought another lot at the corner of Summit and Tamalpais Avenues. Architect Emil Bay designed a house, which was completed in 1893. A few years later, the Coffins bought an adjoining lower lot creating a .9-acre parcel. (That same house now has the street address of #15 Tamalpais Avenue and was long the home of the Dr. Robert Palmer family. OAC member Melanie Palmer still lives there.)

Barry Spitz's Mill Valley book says, "*The Coffins named their home Vineyard Haven for the grape arbors (which still grow) they planted on the site. But since the house's curved porches and windows, built to take full advantage of the views (Alonzo loved looking out with his telescope), resembled the ferry boats then plying San Francisco Bay, the name Ferryboat House gained wider acceptance. An impressive garden, with paths outlined by native blue rock, was laid out.*"

In 1900, Louise's husband Alonzo was part of a group of prominent citizens who wanted to keep the town "dry." So they founded a new newspaper, *The Mill Valley Record*, to compete with the existing *Marin County Enterprise*, which did print some local news, but it mainly proselytized against the town's restrictive liquor laws and was distributed in the many illegal saloons.

Alonzo was also one of Mill Valley's first commuters. By the time the Coffins were full time residents of Vineyard Haven, one could get on a train at the Mill Valley Depot which would take you to a San Francisco bound ferry. In daughter Irene's oral history, she says, "*As a commuter, my father left very early on the first train out of Mill Valley at 6:45 a.m.*" She says her mother and father were fond of the theater, which sometimes meant they might have to return home late so they would take the last ferry, at 11:30 p.m. "*There was no train into Mill Valley as late as that so the late travelers would take the San Rafael train and get off at Alto, as he (Alonzo) mentions in his diary, 'Louise and I walked home to Mill Valley on a moonlight night, and it was just beautiful.' . . . 'I'm impressed now when I recall how much pleasure the Mill Valleyites got out of commuting. It was a pleasure and a joy to them. One morning my father overslept. He never took much time for breakfast, but that morning he heard the five-minute whistle. That's the engineer's way of letting the men know the train would be leaving in five minutes. In five minutes my father got his clothes on, got out of the house and caught that train (by taking) a diagonal path, a beeline to the station. He loved to tell that story himself.*"

In his book, Barry Spitz says, "*It would be hard to overstate the importance of trains in the story of early Mill Valley.*" In addition to enabling some Mill Valley men to commute to the city, trains also brought hundreds of weekend hikers, campers, hotel guests and other visitors to Mill Valley. All those tourists created problems, primarily by leaving litter everywhere and damaging the local trails. Something needed to be done, but who would take action to solve this real problem?

In 1902, Louise was 44 years old, living in Vineyard Haven, with two children: son Walter born in 1886, and daughter Irene born in 1888. Her nearby neighbors were Agnes Cappleman, Carrie Hunt, Alice Folker, Mollie Eloesser, Carrie Klyce and Louise lives just down the hill from Laura Lyon White. She joined her neighbors in coming together to collectively deal with litter left by tourists as well as improve upon the disgraceful state of the playground at the local school on the corner of Summit and Cornelia Avenues. Our Founders lost no time in dealing with those community issues, but they also made room for social events. In the first two years of printed annual reports of the Outdoor Art Club, Mrs. A. Coffin is listed as an Active Member. She was on the Tea Committee in 1903-1904. Our Archives do not yet reveal many more details of Louise's activities in the Club.



There is in Barry Spitz's book an 1894 photograph of Irene Coffin's 6<sup>th</sup> birthday party. A crowded group of dozens of children are on the curved porch of Vineyard Haven, clearly having a great time. Spitz says, *"The Coffin family were pillars of the community. Alonzo, despite his long commute, served several terms on the Mill Valley School Board and was the third president of the Board of Trustees. Louise was a founding member of the Outdoor Art Club. After 1906 when Irene followed Walter to college at Berkeley, the family rented the house for \$100 per month, furnished. Alonzo still came to Masonic meetings in Mill Valley and became the Lodge's Worshipful Master in 1910 to 1917, the Coffins summered in Mill Valley. In 1917, they sold Vineyard Haven for \$7,000 cash."*

Census records show that in 1910, Louise and Alonzo Coffin were still living in Berkeley with their two adult children. Records show that Louise and Alonzo continued to live in Alameda County for the rest of their lives. Louise died February 27, 1940 at age 82 and is buried in Colma.

In the next installment of the OAC Serial, **"The 35 Ladies Project"**, you will meet another Founder, a widow who was the town's first female Postmistress, a President of the OAC and a Community leader.