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VALLEY NEWCOMER PICKS UP WHERE KIN LEFT OFF IN THE 1800S

LEIGH WEIMERS column

IT WAS 1851 when the first Splivalo settled in California, seeking riches in the Gold Rush. He didn't make his bundle with nuggets but in the mercantile business, bought what would become an historic home in San Jose and prospered.

It's now 2000, and the latest Splivalo has settled in the San Jose area, seeking riches in Silicon Valley's gold rush. Will he make a bundle, buy back the historic homestead and prosper?

"It would be nice if I could have the same accomplishments," says **David Splivalo**, 23. "That would definitely be a full circle of events."

Hey, a guy can dream, can't he?

This latest Splivalo has been in Silicon Valley all of six months, coming here to work in public relations after graduating from California State University-Fresno. But his roots here go deep. "Capt. Stefano Splivalo was an Italian sea captain who moved here with his wife and two children in 1851 and became a U.S. citizen in 1853," Splivalo says.

"He earlier had piloted the first steamship, bringing 49ers, into San Francisco Bay. He tried some mining at Sutter's Fort and then got involved in the mercantile business, made a fortune and bought a house in San Jose."

Some house. The sea captain purchased what's now known as the Roberto-Sunol adobe, one of the city's oldest structures. Located at 770 Lincoln Ave. hard by Interstate 280, the adobe was built by an American Indian, renamed Roberto Balermino by priests at Mission Santa Clara. "It originally was about the size of one of today's family rooms," Splivalo says.

The house was deeded to Antonio Sunol in 1847, in payment of a \$500 debt, and renamed "Laura Ville." Sunol, a San Jose postmaster and grog shop owner who would go on to become one of the region's major landowners, added a section of brick-walled rooms to the structure. Historians say he entertained lavishly there during California's first legislative session in 1849-50. When Capt. Splivalo bought the house in 1853, he in turn encased the adobe's 18-inch-thick walls in wood, added a wooden second story and balcony and planted grapes on its surrounding 55 acres of land, using them to make wine.

"He died there, I believe, in 1891," Splivalo says, "and his wife about six years later." The dwelling passed from family ownership, but by then, one of the couple's sons had moved to San

Francisco and made a name for himself in politics.

"He was Augustus Splivalo, my great-great-grandfather," Splivalo continues. "He graduated from Santa Clara University, became an attorney, was elected to the California Assembly, gave a big Columbus Day speech that was widely reported, and ran for the U.S. Senate in 1876 on the Republican ticket."

Augustus Splivalo lost much of his holdings in the earthquake and fire of 1906, but one of his sons, Augustus Jr., kept the family's San Francisco fortunes going as a tobacco shop owner. Jack, a son of Augustus Jr., then followed a career in the merchant marine and eventually settled in Fresno. His son, Michael Splivalo, is **David Splivalo's** father and a practicing attorney in Visalia.

That's where David grew up, quietly at first. "I wasn't born with a speech impediment," he says. "I just didn't speak. I had to go to classes when I was 3 years old to learn to speak; what was coming out to that point was just gibberish."

A facility for speech

That he mastered speech is amply demonstrated by his life from that point onward. "One of my parents complained, 'The kid never shuts up,' " he jokes.

Splivalo went on to Fresno State, where he majored in public relations. "And I was a debater at Fresno State for all four years," he says. "They tell me that no one in Fresno State debate history had ever debated for eight continuous semesters before."

Like his great-great-grandfather, he also tried his hand at politics. He ran for student-body vice president and won. He interned with former Rep. Richard Lehman of Fresno, Sen. Barbara Boxer and Lt. Gov. Cruz Bustamante. He thrived on the fundraisers, the legwork, the life of a political junkie. But when it came time to seek regular work after graduation, he decided to make a change.

"I thought of making the transition directly from college into politics, but I felt that the time wasn't right," Splivalo says. "I didn't want to be regarded as a person who's simply been a career politician. I didn't want to have that on my back. I'd rather spend my time serving my community and working for my community and being known by my community."

Which community? Not Visalia. Not Fresno. San Jose.

"I'd become consumed by the literature and information that was provided to me about my family," he explains. "It's really second nature for me to want to become involved with that." He pauses thoughtfully. "Stefano could have been an ordinary sea captain. But he said, 'You know what? I like where I'm staying.' He was very forthcoming and wanted to pursue opportunities. I think it's the same force that's driving me. I think I have a lot of the same skills and qualities that my past generations had, such as Stefano and Augustus."

The similarities of the gold rushes then and now also aren't lost on him. Nor the hardships. "It was quite interesting looking for an apartment, I have to tell you," he says. "Making the transition from Fresno to Santa Clara was quite a shock. I had to add an extra zero to my rent check. I keep telling myself that my family was one of the early settlers to this area. Why am I renting an apartment?"

An urge for research

Splivalo found that apartment in Santa Clara, near the university and only a seven-minute commute from the public relations agency where he found employment, McGrath/Power. He's been spending his first six months there getting up to speed in the Silicon Valley rush. "He's doing a lot of research now," says McGrath/Power President Terri Cook. "He's really quite

an interesting person. The more we learn of him in the office, the more we realize he's not an ordinary fellow."

That anything-but-ordinary history colors much of what Splivalo does. "I really enjoy the opportunity to jog over to the university," he says. "It's just amazing, really, to walk in the same steps that my great-great-grandfather did years ago. But the one thing that really makes me grind my teeth is that not that many people know who the Splivalo family was or the contributions they made to San Jose's past."

Perhaps it won't be too long before that name is better known. "I'm very ambitious to seek public office," Splivalo acknowledges. "Right now, I'm concentrating on my job. But public relations is something that can transfer over to a campaign -- to an effective campaign.

"You know," he continues, "what moved me over here was basically the opportunity that awaited Stefano when he settled here. And that was that there was an opportunity of vast proportions. If you dedicate yourself to it, you can make a fortune in it. And also, you could leave part of yourself behind, make an impact in the valley, the area. That's what he did. That's what I'd like to do."

He muses, "It would be nice if I could have the same accomplishments Augustus had. I tell my parents this, that some day I'd like to buy that house (the Roberto-Sunol adobe), to bring it back into the family (it's now being used for law offices). That definitely would be a full circle of events."

David Splivalo is a direct descendant of Capt. Stefano Splivalo, who bought the San Jose adobe known as Laura Ville in 1853.

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