

The Morgan Hill Sentinel
The First Newspaper for a New City

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The first edition of *The Morgan Hill Sentinel* hit the dusty streets of the new community of Morgan Hill, California on Thursday March 30, 1893. There would never be a second edition.

One-edition publications were not a new phenomenon in American journalism history. Indeed in 1690, *Publick Occurrences, Both Foreign and Domestick*, generally considered America's first newspaper, had also disappeared after its first edition. Boston publisher Benjamin Harris had failed to obtain a colonial government license for his fledgling paper and it was immediately shut down by authorities. Thus began America's struggle for a press free from government control. But it would be fourteen years before another newspaper appeared in colonial America. (1)

The reasons for the swift demise of *The Morgan Hill Sentinel* are lost in the swirls of historical speculation. What caused editor and publisher A. Bert Bynon to cease publication so abruptly? Was it lack of advertising or circulation support, or production capabilities, or market or political forces blowing against the venture? In any event, there is no evidence of a Vol. I No. 2, and Bynon went on to other towns and other publishing ventures. A year later, on April 12, 1894, George Edes founded the *Morgan Hill Sun*. That enterprise has continued over the years under various banners: *Morgan Hill Sun* (1894-1901); *Morgan Hill Sun-Times* (1901-06); *Morgan Hill Times* (1906-30); *Morgan Hill Times & San Martin News* (1930-37); *The Times* (1937-47); *Morgan Hill Times and San Martin News* (1947-86); and *Morgan Hill Times* (1986-present). The *Times'* continuity makes it Morgan Hill's oldest business and supports its own claim to being the first newspaper in town. But the *Sentinel*, however short-lived, was a newspaper too and it was first.

Newspapers had become a common part of 19th century American life. They had crossed the prairie with the pioneers and established themselves in most farming communities and mining camps. Immigrants started newspapers in their own languages. The Civil War had heightened the desire for news and the telegraph had brought the news faster. While early papers had been primarily house organs for political parties or commercial gazettes listing shipping manifests (including slaves), by the *fin de siècle* most papers were robust, advertising-driven, publications of gossip, sensational entertainment and news. In the West the *Los Angeles Times* was begun in 1881 and William Randolph Hearst acquired the *San Francisco Examiner* in 1887 to compete in a lively local and national newspaper market. Even San Jose boasted numerous papers. (2)

Following the Mexican secularization of the original Spanish missions in Alta California in 1834, the lands were distributed to well-connected Mexican citizens, including rancho Ojo de Agua de la Coche to Juan Maria Hernandez. By the mid 19th century, the promise of land, and then the discovery of gold, brought increasing numbers of Americans – many European immigrants themselves, to California by

ship or overland by wagon across the Sierra Nevada mountains. Among the first to arrive in the Santa Clara Valley was the Murphy family in 1845. Martin Murphy Sr. acquired Rancho Ojo de Agua de la Coche through an intermediary from Juan Hernandez. The Murphys and a few other families began local farming and ranching and acquiring more land. The youngest Murphy son, Daniel, eventually acquired enough land in California, Nevada and Mexico to be known as the “largest landowner in the world.” His daughter, Diana Murphy, inherited her father’s lands in the Santa Clara Valley and Nevada. Diana met and married Hiram Morgan Hill of San Francisco. After extended travel in Europe, the couple returned to America and Hiram managed his father-in-law’s lands in Nevada before returning to the Santa Clara Valley. Now heirs to 22,000 acres of the original land grant, they built their home, Villa Mira Monte, in the shadow of Murphy’s Peak (now El Toro) in 1886. However, the couple spent little time there, he attending to ranching and mining interests in Nevada, she and their daughter Diane enjoying the social scene in San Francisco and Washington D.C. The Hills subsequently contracted with C. H. Phillips to subdivide all but 200 acres of the property around the house in 1892. (3)

Traditionally, towns developed in geographically strategic locations: trading crossroads, rail lines or hubs, waterways or natural resources. Morgan Hill had few of those things to offer. Prior to the subdivision of the ranches, the region consisted of remote homesteads surrounded by thousands of acres of ranchland. Nearby settlements grew up around roadhouses and stage coach stops along El Camino Real connecting the old missions, and train stops serving travelers between San Jose and Monterey. Subdivision of the ranches allowed small farmers to slowly settle southern Santa Clara Valley for the first time. Subdivision included laying out an actual town of Morgan Hill. (4)

By the 1880s, the Southern Pacific Railroad owned huge tracts of land along its tracks and right-of-ways. Southern Pacific began promoting settlements along its rail lines. For years, passengers had been dropped off at “Morgan Hill’s place.” No official stop appeared until 1893. After subdivision, the railroad actively promoted Morgan Hill as a good place to settle. (5)

This, then, was the scene Alfred Herbert Bynon came upon and he seized the opportunity to create a newspaper in the nascent township of Morgan Hill. Alfred Herbert “A. Bert” Bynon was born in Brooklyn, New York on June 12, 1868. His father was Alfred Augustus Bynon, a Canadian from Prince Edward Island, and his mother was Marcella Struensa Savonna Rand from New Brunswick. Bert was one of 11 siblings and half-siblings. Little is known of his formative years, but the family soon moved west; his brother Frederick was born in Oakland, California in 1870, another brother Edward in Sacramento in 1873. His father, known as A.A. Bynon, was a printer and publisher by trade. (6) A blurb in the *Sacramento Daily Union* in 1875 mentions that *The Mercantile Globe*, published by Bynon & Co. since 1872, was changed to the *Sacramento Globe* in October 1875. (7) Like many sons, the Bynon boys learned the trade of their father. The family apparently kept moving. The 1880 U.S. census finds Bert in Myrtle Creek, Oregon, but by the mid-1880s he is with

his brother at their father's paper in Los Angeles, the *Hollywood Citizen*. Los Angeles city directories for 1886 and 1887 list A. Bert Bynon as a "collector" and a "pressman" Skilled at both copywriting and in the backshop of newspaper printing, Bynon branched out for himself, working at the *Los Angeles Herald* and as an editor at the *Los Angeles Express*. At some point he was hired by Gaylord Wilshire, the Southern California real estate magnate, to edit *Wilshire's Magazine*, printed first in New York and later Toronto, Canada. In 1889, Bynon married Clarissa Jane McGrath. Their first daughter, Marcella, was born in 1890 in Canada, but the 1890 U.S. census lists the Bynons as residents of San Diego. By 1893, Bynon was running a paper called the *Oceanside Blade* in southern California. *The Journalist*, a trade publication and directory, that year mentions, "A. Bert Bynon, editor of the *Oceanside Blade*, will publish a paper called *The Sentinel* in the promising town of Morgan Hill." (8)

It is unknown how Bynon and his brother , Frederick, came to hear of Morgan Hill. A good guess would be that railroad or real estate promotional material reached them in southern California and they saw a business opportunity on the ground floor of the new community in the Santa Clara Valley. In any case, the brothers arrived by or before early 1893 and set up shop in a local barn. It is also unknown where or how they acquired a printing press and any needed capital for their venture. It is likely they were familiar with the publishing community in San Jose or even San Francisco. In 1893, there was as yet no bank in Morgan Hill, only a general store and saloon. The task of generating advertising revenue for the new paper fell largely to Frederick Bynon and would have required a certain amount of lead- time prior to publication. That spring, the fertile agricultural land that became known worldwide as the "Valley of Hearts Delight" also saw the birth of a new publication for a new town.

Because of the newspaper's early demise (and the small population that would have seen it to begin with) it was soon overshadowed by other publications, and largely forgotten by even local historians. However in 1989, local resident Miriam St. Clair was sorting through belongings of her late grandfather Frank C. Wilson, an orchardist who died in 1943, that had been passed down through the family. In a satchel she found a well-preserved, folded copy of *The Morgan Hill Sentinel*, Vol. I, No. 1, dated March 30, 1893. The single, only-known copy of the paper now is preserved in the collection of the Morgan Hill Historical Society. It offers an illustrative look at the town on the verge of being, a time capsule of the turn-of-the-century farming community that would become Morgan Hill. (9)

The surviving sample is a single broadsheet 36 inches deep and 24 inches wide, printed on both sides, which if folded and cut would result in an eight page, 18" x 12" publication. Perhaps this copy was a page proof off the press, accounting for it not having been cut. Despite having been folded for decades, the paper has remained intact. The pages follow a vertical, four column layout, common for the period. The typography is consistent and spare in terms of style; the font size small.

The look of the paper would be considered “grey” by modern standards. There are no photographs or engravings illustrating the stories.

Editorial copy (the so called news-hole) represents 315 of the total 512 column inches, or 61.5 per cent, leaving 38.5 per cent for advertising . This roughly 60:40 ratio is acceptable for a successful (pre-online era) paper, although two of the ads are for *The Sentinel*, itself, and thus not income-generating. There is no advertising on the front page, historically considered sacred news space, nor is there advertising on page 4. The back page is given over to a single real estate ad for Hale’s Subdivision. The rest of the advertising appears on pages 2, 3, 5, 6, and 7. Most ads are small, one column placements, an exception being a two column ad for Barnett & Blabon Well Borers on page 2. The advertisers, most of which were located in San Jose, represent a variety of local businesses aiming to attract rural customers : Dashaway Stables, Conklings Feed and Seed, Miles Fruit and Ornamental Trees, McKee & Co. Paints, Mueller Smoked Meats, Parkman Boots, F.L. Argall-Dentist, architects, lumber yards, furniture manufacturers, and C.H. Phillips real estate agent. Local Morgan Hill advertising included Covert’s Cash Store (also the post office and telephone exchange), E. Swope Blacksmithing, and the Morgan Hill Bakery.

The editorial content of this edition is largely a gathering of items reprinted from other sources. Page 1 offers “News of the World”, five one-line obituaries (not local), and “West of the Sierras”, reprinted from the *New York Mail & Express*. Page 2 is devoted to a long form story called “Olga’s Escape” from *Cornhill Magazine*, which jumps to and fills page 7. Page 3 offers a few reprinted pieces of no particular relevance, but also contains blurbs about Covert’s Grocery Store and a pair of San Jose businesses. These blurbs are also repeated on page 4, along with more editorial mentions of local businesses, whose ads are also in the paper. These mentions are unlikely any kind of an early public relations effort by these businesses; rather they reflect the practice of providing or trading editorial for advertisers. Of course it was in the Bynons’ interests to support fledgling local business, though more modern journalism practice would frown on such overt promotion. Also on page 3 is a full column article written by Bynon: “Morgan Hill. The Gem of the Fertile Santa Clara. A Town that is Destined to Become a Thriving City:

“Morgan Hill is a new town but is settling up with amazing rapidity and it is safe to assert that no other town in California can offer more and safer inducements to businessmen than it....

The supply depot of such a fertile and extensive territory must necessarily attain, in time, the dignity of a prosperous and populous city and now is the time to start a business that will grow up with the town and reap the benefits of an established and respected reputation. The Sentinel will be pleased to furnish non-residents with any information regarding the town or valley which they may desire, upon application.”

(10)

Clearly this was a time when the line between editorial objectivity and unabashed boosterism blurred easily, if it existed at all. In advocating on behalf of the town's growth, the Bynons were in a symbiotic relationship with Morgan Hill. As the town grew and prospered, so would their advertising revenue and related printing work. Conversely, their editorial endorsement would help fuel that growth. While some modern journalism may have risen above such self-interest conflicts, the model still exists in many print and broadcast outlets today.

The staff box, found on page 4 lists Bynon Brothers as proprietors: Fred as business manager and A. Bert as editor.

"The first number of the Sentinel is submitted to the public without apology or a tedious account of the many wonderful reforms and improvements it intends to conceive and bring forth.

The publishers have carefully considered the advisability, from a business standpoint, of starting a newspaper at this place and the appearance of The Sentinel today is the result." Bynon goes on to solicit advertising support from the community and declare the paper's independence. Interestingly, in an adjacent article he writes, "Evidently the Southern Pacific didn't want a paper at Morgan Hill but they're not in it when it comes to baulking a printer."

This would not be the last time A. Bert Bynon would take aim at Southern Pacific.
(11)

The rest of the editorial content of the paper is largely culled from a variety of national and English sources. There are two full columns of local news called "Home Happenings." Interestingly it recounts the demise of a neighboring Saratoga newspaper, also called *The Sentinel*. There is also a local obituary and a summary of San Francisco grain, fruit, dairy and poultry market prices.

Given the optimistic tone of the editor and the relative abundance of advertising, there is every reason to believe *The Morgan Hill Sentinel* could have been successful. Did the Bynons face opposition from the railroad or fall afoul of some of the large, local, powerful families? Did disaster such as a fire strike and destroy their press? Did the brothers lose heart that Morgan Hill would, in fact, not live up to their promotional hype? In any event, there is no evidence of a second edition of the paper. By 1894, George Edes was in town starting the *Morgan Hill Sun*. There is no record of him buying a paper from the Bynons. By that time A. Bert Bynon was gone, having taken his journalism career south down Monterey Road to Gilroy, where he edited and published the *Gilroy American*, both weekly and daily, in 1894.

The brief existence of *The Morgan Hill Sentinel* was not entirely forgotten. A quartet of articles in the *Morgan Hill Times*, each about a decade apart, recall a faint memory of the early paper:

In a 1923 column, we can read, "A. Bert Bynon, who established *the Sentinel* in Morgan Hill in 1893, called at the *Times* office Wednesday afternoon. Mr. Bynon is now running the *Evening Observer* in Hollister." (12) In 1933, a *Times* article said,

“Little seems to be known of the real beginnings of a newspaper in Morgan Hill, but it seems some sort of publication was issued by two young men, the Bynan [sic] brothers, in a barn on the property in the rear of where the Farmer’s Union Building now stands.” (13)

And a 1941 article describing early Morgan Hill newspaper history writes, “However, the real beginning of journalism in Morgan Hill seems to have been a publication put out in a barn by two young Bynan [sic] brothers which can still be recalled by old- timers.” (14)

Finally there is the article reporting the find of the extant copy in the satchel in 1989, “Grandfather’s papers give up historical nugget”. The article quotes Mary Dutra, then curator of the Morgan Hill Historical Museum saying she didn’t doubt *the Sun* had predecessors. “Some old newspapers were started and didn’t last very long.” (15)

In 1894, while Morgan Hill was still primarily made up of large ranches that were slowly being developed into smaller parcels and the population still numbered in the hundreds, its neighboring city of Gilroy was much more established with more than three thousand residents and a newspaper history dating back to the *Gilroy Advocate* in (1868-1949). Several papers flourished there in the years before Bynon arrived: *Gilroy Telegram* (1871), *Gilroy Union* (1872), *California Weekly Leader* (1875), *Gilroy Advocate Leader* (1875-78), *Gilroy Independent* (1876), *Valley Record* (1881-87), (1887), *Gilroy Crescent* (1888). However Bynon’s tenure at the *Gilroy American* was almost as short-lived as it was in Morgan Hill and he was back in southern California by 1896, editing the *San Pedro American*. He appears on the 1896 Los Angeles voter rolls and is listed in the Los Angeles 1897 city directory as a pressman. His son, Henry Herbert Bynon, was born in San Pedro in October 1897.

While working at the *San Pedro American*, a four-page Saturday weekly, Bynon was the defendant in a libel suit brought on by a Dr. Hill. *The Los Angeles Herald* reported that, “A jury deliberated just one hour and forty minutes yesterday afternoon before agreeing that A. Bert Bynon, the youthful and indiscreet editor of the *San Pedro American*, was guilty of criminal libel...[Deputy District] Attorney McComas made a brilliant oration, flaying the young fellow for his persistent persecution of Dr. Hill, which was not criticism of a public official, but was mere ribaldry and ridicule.” (16)

It was while in San Pedro that Bynon also produced his most memorable work in 1899, a 52- page book entitled *San Pedro: its History* that is still in circulation. Bynon was secretary of the San Pedro Improvement League, a strictly non-political organization dedicated to improvement and advancement of the town.

He wrote, “One need not allow his imagination free rein while writing of the future of *San Pedro* – the truth, plain and unvarnished, is sufficient in her case, for her prospects are real, tangible, there is life in them. It is a positive fact that she is soon to have one

of the greatest and grandest harbors on the Pacific coast, she now has excellent and increasing railway communications with the interior of the country and by these signs all things else she may require to make herself a flourishing city will come as surely as night follows day, and come, too, in time for her present generation of citizens as well as friends abroad, to glory in her greatness.” (17)

San Pedro: its History is a work of unparalleled civic boosterism, eclipsing anything he had written about Morgan Hill. But in the muckraking era when journalists and authors often wore the mantle of reformers, like Frank Norris’s *The Octopus* or Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle*, Bynon offers a strong challenge to trusts and established interests that stand in the way of civic progress. In his introduction, he writes, “The author has enjoyed unusual opportunities for being familiar with the business and social conditions of Southern Pacific.” (18) Perhaps his Morgan Hill experience helped influence his writing in San Pedro.

For the next decade Bynon was based in southern California, although in 1902 his son, Edward, is born in Ontario, Canada. That same year Bynon starts the *Ocean Park Review*, covering the Santa Monica-Venice area and works on that and the *Santa Monica Morning Review* until 1910, when he is listed in the U.S. census as living in Sparks, Nevada, his occupation printer/publishing. A daughter Sierra Savonna is born that year in Nevada. In addition to newspapering, he also seems to have been a long-time Pacific Coast representative for R.L. Polk Directory Co. Moving back to California he edited the *Willow Progress* (Glenn County) in 1914 and he was in Palo Alto long enough to close down the *Weekly Citizen*, though continuing job printing there. During World War I, Bynon was editor of the *Vallejo Times*, while two of his sons served overseas.

In 1919 Bynon was editing the *Selma Irrigator* (Fresno County), where he wrote this comment about an immigration issue of the day:

The Japs may be a menace top California, yet from what I have been able to gather from the fruit growets and beet growers of this state a much more definite and tangible menace to these two great sources of wealth would be the absence of the Japs....We have the evidence of many, very many, fruit growers to the effect that white men will not work in the fruit as the Japs will, and do. The work must be done, or there can be no crop. The Jap does it. The white man will not. He does not get this work from any sentimental preference, but simply because he is more reliable and more industrious than his white hater. “ (19)

This social commentary is more a pragmatic economic analysis than a call for racial equality and social justice. And it foreshadows prejudices that color his editorials years later. Still, it follows Bynon’s civic-minded progressive philosophy.

By the 1920s, Bynon had returned to the periphery of the Santa Clara Valley, editing the *Hollister Morning Observer*, and even calling on the office of the *Morgan Hill Times*, as mentioned earlier. In 1989, a mass communications graduate student at

San Jose State University, Joyce Assar, following up on the report of the discovery of the *Morgan Hill Sentinel*, wrote a paper "The Historian as Detective: The Search for A. Bert Bynon. In her research, Assar focused on Bynon's years in Hollister. According to Assar, *The Observer* was first published February 26, 1923. Its debut ignored by both the existing *Hollister Freelance* and *Hollister Advance*. Describing a copy from 1925, Assar writes, "The 1925 Morning Observer's pages were large-sized {a broadsheet} and full of advertising. The left side of the front page contained a standing head entitled "Prattle" in which Bynon airs his views concerning local and national events...However there is a curious item in the "Prattle" section of the newspaper which foreshadows Bynon's concerns in later editions of the *Observer* (20):

When William G. McAdoo was asked yesterday to state his position on the Ku Klux Klan, he handed his inquisitors this and called it a day: 'I stand four square with respect to this and every other organization on the immutable questions of liberty contained in the first amendment of the Constitution of the United States.'" (21)

Bynon's openness toward the KKK would color his journalism going forward.

While Bynon's 1924 editions were typical of small town American newspapers, for example a staff written advertisement for duck eggs at the newspaper office, by 1925 the paper had been downsized and scaled back to a weekly, its name changed to simply the *Observer*, its advertising greatly reduced and its content a forum for Bynon's political views. There had been a resurgence of the KKK in the United States during the 1920s; an estimated four to five million Americans had joined by 1925. The Klan advocated patronizing the businesses of other Klan members. Bynon editorialized favorably about the KKK and many of the ads in his paper carried Klan iconography and endorsed Klan-friendly businesses. This triggered a backlash and in a May 1925 edition of the *Observer*, Bynon complained that "Catholics and their allies" bullied the merchants of Hollister into boycotting the paper. (22)

Bynon's other cause seems to have been Prohibition and the aggressive enforcement of the Volstead Act to find and punish violators of the 18th Amendment. Bynon went on to link alcohol bootleggers with the supporters of the boycott against his paper. Soon he found himself in a war of words with the *Hollister Free Lance*, which reported in March 1925 that Bynon was being foreclosed upon and closing down the paper. He did, indeed, downsize the paper and relocate to a KKK-friendly business location, an auto camp "For white tourists exclusively." That spring Bynon's editorial stance became increasingly more anti-immigrant, anti-ethnic (Irish) and anti-Catholic and more partisan Protestant, a far cry from his reasoned support of the Japanese farm workers a few years earlier. He also fell under increasing economic pressure, appealing to his readers, "Until the boycott against the merchants of this town is broken the *Observer* must exist on the subscriptions of those who regard this fight as nationwide and who realize that the concern of one section, however small, is the concern of all. The price is three

dollars a year.” (23) Worn down by the conflict and struggling for cash, Bynon folded his newspaper and abandoned Hollister shortly thereafter. As with his arrival, neither the *Free Lance* nor the *Advance* made mention of his departure.

The trail of A. Bert Bynon’s peripatetic journalism career goes faint during his final decade. In 1930 he was a resident of Buckeye, Maricopa County, Arizona. In 1934 he was working for the *New Mexico Examiner* in Santa Fe, operated by his son, Larry (who became publicity director for the Republican National Committee). He lived with a daughter again in Phoenix in 1935 but returned to Santa Fe and kept at his trade until he died Oct. 1, 1938 when the presses of life rolled out his last edition. (24)

Notes

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14. _____, “Early newspaper History Here Reveals Many Owners and \$1 per Inch Advertising, 23 May 1941.
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