

## SILICON ALLEYS



Gary Singh

**FENCED HISTORY** Part of the strip mall where Big Al's Record Barn once held court.

# BLUE BASCOM

*A waltz down Memory Avenue, from Linoleum Dicks and Tower Records to Alviso and Los Gatos*

BY GARY SINGH

**I**N HIS MAGNUM opus about the Danube River, Claudio Magris tracked the entire course of the waterway from the Alps to the Black Sea. Filled with history, politics and geography, Danube is an epic 400-page love letter to Mitteleuropa, in which Haydn, Hölderlin and the Hapsburgs sit right alongside the most obscure nobodies, all of whom contributed to the grand aura of the river.

In San Jose, one can do the same thing with Bascom Ave. If Bascom was a river, it would be the Danube of San Jose. When considered along with the streets it eventually morphs into at both ends, Bascom is an iconic artery drawing from a syncretism of discarded history and culture. It is the crucible of MittelsanJose.

Seventy years ago — a drip in the fondue bowl by European standards — Bascom was only called Bascom north of San Carlos. Southward from there it was called San Jose-Los Gatos Road because, well, that's what it did. It went from San Jose to Los Gatos.

Going the other way, as it unfolded into the neighborhood of Santa Clara University, Bascom became Washington and then ended there. Now it turns into Lafayette Street, which goes all the way to Alviso.

Seventy years ago, that stretch of road was called Santa Clara-Alviso Road. Similarly, North First Street in San Jose, between the airport and Alviso, was called San Jose-Alviso Road, and Winchester was called—you guessed it—Santa Clara-Los Gatos Road. The yokels in charge couldn't think of anything else to call these streets. In 1950, everything in-between was orchards and ranchland, so no one fathomed a day when any more than 90,000 people would ever want to live here.

Which is why world history triggers me to view my own landscape in fresh new ways. No, San Jose will never have its Hölderlin to write poetry about San Jose-Alviso Road, or its Johann Strauss to compose the Blue Bascom Waltz. We'll never have an exquisite Baroque palace overlooking the Danube. All we're going to get is a

Googletown mashup on TikTok. At least it's nowhere near Bascom.

As such, any lazy two-hour stroll down Bascom feels like an unfolding of San Jose history, replete with stories, characters and geography. I could raise so many ghosts on Bascom that it's hard to keep track of them all. I think of Tower Records or Otto's Garden Room down by the Gatos border. And of course, who can stop looking at the glorious panorama of ruin that used to include Big Al's Record Barn and the notorious dive bar, Club Four? I say keep it. If Greece and Rome can turn their ruins into tourist traps, why can't San Jose?

I remember several years ago there was a guy with a Tower Records tattoo on his right arm. In color. I did not know him, but when viewing a picture of this masterpiece, I, and certainly others, suggested he finish the rest of his arm with everything else along Bascom that doesn't exist anymore: Linoleum Dick's, The Heathkit Store and Quement Electronics to name but a few. And then he could cover his left arm with everything on Winchester. Now that would be something worthy of all those promotional catch phrases with 408 in the title.

Yes, some of this is Campbell, not San Jose—I hear you cry—but it's all part of the crucible, just like how the Germans, the Magyars, the Slovaks or the Romanians can all claim a legitimate relationship with the Danube. Gold Street flows into Lafayette, which flows into Bascom, which flows into Los Gatos Blvd. Only a lunatic would do this, but you can drive from Maria Elena's in Alviso all the way to Los Gatos High School without ever leaving the same contiguous city street. Most people don't realize it because thanks to GPS, nobody looks at maps anymore. Like the Danube, Bascom transcends all city borders imposed on it.

So when Magris describes the Danube as the “hinterworld behind the nations,” I immediately think about the long stretch of underbelly from Agnew Station to an abandoned car dealership at Los Gatos Almaden Road. Were Bascom a river, it would flow like the current of life itself. 