

# CONTRA COSTA TIMES

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## Project chronicles early 20th century creekside life



GREGORY URQUIAGA/STAFF

**NORM MCDONALD**, center, gives video crew members Ezra Rasmussen, left, Michele Lith and Brett Stevenson a look at family photos as part of the Martinez Oral History Project.

By Lisa P. White  
STAFF WRITER

The 95-year-old Griffin twins grew up on a farm beside Alhambra Creek watching their mother's grueling daily routine of milking cows, boiling laundry, tending the garden and preparing the mid-day meal.

Their mom, Jessie Griffin, also canned fruit, made quilts and rag rugs and sewed underclothes out of sugar and flour sacks.

"Everything was done the hard way and hard work; so woman's life on the farm was not easy," twin Bess Girgich says during a videotaped interview for an oral history project documenting early 20th century life in the Alhambra Creek watershed. "Young people

### IF YOU GO

■ **WHAT:** A presentation on the Oral History Project of Martinez and Alhambra Creek Watershed

■ **WHEN:** 7 p.m. Tuesday

■ **WHERE:** Martinez Public Library, 740 Court St.

For more information about the event or to volunteer with the project call Andrea Blachman at 925-228-8160.

today just have no idea the amount of work it took just to keep food on the table."

For the past year, a dedicated group of amateur historians has

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## Project

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been collecting accounts of creekside life in Martinez so generations to come will understand the evolving relationship between people and the creek.

The oral history project grew out of work being done by the Alhambra Valley Creek Coalition, a group of 47 property owners who are trying to prevent further erosion of the creek banks.

"People would tell stories about having lived there a long time, so we came up with the idea that it would be neat to keep some of that history and document it for future use," said Jamie Menasco, who has lived in Martinez for five years.

Girgich and her brother, Tom, were born in 1912 on the 300-acre farm their grandfather settled in 1868. The Griffin family was close to their neighbor, John Muir. He gave the twins gold coins on their birthday. Their father, George, was a pallbearer at Muir's funeral.

In her interview Girgich recalls scraping softened bristles off the skins of boiled pigs, watching holiday parades on Main Street, emptying chamber pots in the flower garden and wearing lace-up shoes and stockings to school — under protest.

"I think (oral history) adds that human element — first of all, voice," said Martinez Mu-



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**DELORIS AND NORM MCDONALD** wait as Brett Stevenson sets up the camera for an interview about the history of Martinez.

seum director Andrea Blachman, who interviewed the twins. "So often history for people is just the facts, so this just adds that human dimension."

Volunteers from the coalition, Friends of Alhambra Creek, the Martinez Historical Society and several other organizations have interviewed about a dozen residents whose families have deep roots in the farms and ranches surrounding Martinez.

High school students from the Environmental Studies Academy helped with the taping. The DVDs of the interviews will be housed in the Martinez Museum archives, and Blachman hopes to integrate the videos into upcoming exhibits.

Blachman envisions the oral

history project continuing for years to come, as long as there are people willing to share their stories and volunteers to record them. Future subjects may include sports, life during the Great Depression, the immigrant experience and work inside the canneries and refineries.

"Our mission was really to make people more aware of their natural community and social community," said Carla Koop, who was instrumental in developing the project. "In the interviews, just through the simple act of listening and having a conversation, people are honoring the past, learning about it and passing it on to present generations."