

Ugo Mancini: the American dream realized

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By **David Downey**

Ugo Mancini was a Mountain View fixture for most of the last century.

He built and ran service stations, motorcycle and automobile dealerships, invented pasta machines, and operated a pasta store. His businesses dotted El Camino Real and Castro Street.

Mancini also designed and built an extraordinary home at 334 Church Street. His architectural designs ranged from functional to the fanciful and futuristic. He tirelessly promoted his businesses and gave back to his community. This is his story.

Ugo Mancini and his family immigrated from Lucca, Italy in 1911. The Mancinis' immigration was sponsored by the Nardini family, friends who moved to Mountain View just two years earlier.

In the beginning

Ugo was 16 years old, poor, and couldn't speak English. But the ever-industrious Ugo solved his language problem by enrolling in the Mountain View Grammar School.

He told a local newspaper in 1980 "I spent one month in the first grade, the second month in the second grade, and the third month in the third grade." His course of study was halted by the family's financial needs, and he traded schoolwork for the hard manual labor of a railroad gang in Mountain View, earning the then-generous salary of \$1.68 per day.

One year later, the railroad company discovered that he was only 17 years old and abruptly fired him. From there, he moved on to jobs at the Joshua Hendy Ironworks in Sunnyvale and the Johnson and Son Packard dealership in Palo Alto.

After serving three years as a machinist for Johnson and Son, Mancini decided it was time to run his own business, and he opened a bicycle shop on the State Highway (later

renamed El Camino Real) in what was then Old Mountain View. (Old Mountain View encompassed an area of several blocks in all directions from the intersection of Grant Road and El Camino Real. Ken's Restaurant resides on that lot today.)

Running a business wasn't the only thing on Ugo's mind. Ugo began to take notice of Josephine Nardini.

Josephine's family had sponsored the Mancinis, and the two had played together as children in Italy. They were married in 1918. In 1983, the couple celebrated their 65th anniversary.

Driving forward

Ugo's relentless climb in the business world continued with the purchase of a motorcycle dealership. Next, he partnered with Jack Renaldi and purchased a Nash automobile dealership and opened the State Highway Garage on State Highway, where the American Tire Company resides today.

In 1925, the State Highway Garage was destroyed by fire, and Mancini and Renaldi parted ways. Ugo retained the Nash dealership and relocated it to roomier facilities a few blocks west, on the corner of State Highway and Ehrhorn Street (the current location of Eurocar Engineering).

His new Nash and Ajax automobile dealership, Mancini's Motor Sales and Service Garage, opened for business at the new location in January of 1926. By 1930, Mancini was already remodeling the facilities at Ehrhorn and State Highway. The Grand Opening of the newly remodeled garage featured an orchestra, dancing, and motion pictures of his recent trip to Europe.

In 1929, Mancini purchased a large lot at the corner of Castro and Church Streets with the idea of eventually moving his dealership to the site. By 1933 he was running into issues with the quality of Nash automobiles. His customers were constantly having trouble with their cars and Nash was not responding with corrective measures.

He decided to close the Nash dealership and concentrate solely on repairing the cars he had sold. A San Francisco Chrysler distributor took note of Mancini's customer focus and offered to supply him with Plymouth and DeSoto automobiles. By 1936, Mancini

had vacated the State Highway location and moved Mancini Motors and Service Garage to Castro Street.

He wouldn't stay there long, though. Ugo had dreams of a far grander facility, and was ready to demonstrate his crafty business acumen.

Dealing for the future

Mancini attended the 1939 World's Fair and was particularly impressed with Chrysler Corporation's \$250,000 futuristic exhibit. With the World's Fair about to close Ugo struck a deal with Chrysler to purchase the entire exhibit for the bargain price of \$3000.

After deciding which pieces of the exhibit he wished to use at his future auto dealership (a tower, pylons and other items), he sold the remaining pieces to other businesses for the same price he had paid for the entire exhibit.

He then used the \$3000 from this sale to purchase a prime piece of land at the corner of El Camino Real and Miramonte Avenue (this section of Miramonte is now the portion of Castro Street south of El Camino). Finally, Ugo recouped most of that \$3000 investment by selling a portion of his new lot directly on the corner of El Camino Real and Miramonte to Gilmore Oil Company for use as a gas station. This ultimate entrepreneur had acquired prime land and some fabulous design elements for his new dealership for almost no money.

The centerpiece of the Chrysler exhibit was a 20-ton, 52-foot high stainless steel tower topped by a 9-foot revolving globe of the world. The tower would become the show-piece of his dealership and a beacon to car buyers from all over the peninsula.

Ever the promoter, Ugo decided to take advantage of the public's fascination with his new state of the art and futuristic looking facility by running a contest to come up with a name for his dealership.

In the August 15, 1940 issue of the Mountain View Register Leader, Ugo confessed that he was stumped on what to call his new site. He proposed a naming contest and offered a first prize of \$100 toward the purchase of a new car, a second prize of \$50 towards the purchase of a new car, and a crisp \$10 bill for the third prize winner of his naming contest.

Mancini accepted entries for three weeks and announced names that had been submitted in the September 23rd issue of the Register Leader, claiming he needed one more week to decide which one was his favorite. Finally, in the September 30th issue of the paper, he listed his three favorite names: third prize - "U-Go-In Garage", second prize - "Tower City", and the contest winner was Mrs. Gladys L. Moore of Palo Alto with "Mancini Tower".

Having captivated public interest, he opened his new showroom in late September of 1940. Joining his dealership and the Gilmore Service Station at the site was a large grocery market called Food City. In 1974, the Mancini family sold the lot on the Corner of Castro Street and El Camino Real to Home Savings and the once-futuristic facility was demolished to make room for the new bank.

The next phase

In 1947 Ugo retired and turned over the reigns of his business to his three sons, Ernie, Leo, and Robert Mancini. His next project would be a new home that Mountain View residents would talk about for decades.

The Mancinis' 3500 -square foot home occupied four city lots and its design combined French, Italian, and Southern Californian influences. Completed in 1952, the home generated so much public interest that Mancini decided to conduct tours for the public for fifty cents per person as a means of raising money for charity.

The event drew over 800 curious visitors and raised \$400 which was donated to the Mountain View Boy Scouts and to the Boy's Town in Ugo's hometown of Lucca, Italy.

Italian ceramic tile covered a third of the floor space. The living room was furnished with hand-carved French Provincial pieces. A 200 year old black marble fireplace, imported from Italy, adorned the front room. Hand painted murals covered many of the walls.

In his later years, Ugo remained active inventing pasta machines and selling his own brand of pasta called Flavoretti, including a type he called ugolini. In 1980 the Italian Catholic Federation honored Ugo for a lifetime of good works in support of immigrants.

Also in 1980, the Palo Alto Times Tribune noted that the Mountain View City Council

"passed a resolution recognizing his achievements and his tireless efforts on behalf of the community." Ugo Mancini died in 1985, at the age of 90, bringing to an end the life of a man who embodied the American Dream.
