

# PALO ALTO ODYSSEY

## Bad stoplights and Whiskey Gulch

“WHY aren’t these traffic lights synchronized?” asked Miranda.

“That’s a Palo Alto mystery,” said Valerie.

The two were sitting in Miranda’s car at the bottom of University Avenue, stopped at the Woodland intersection, waiting for its red light to change.

Each time the red light turned green, three cars ahead of Miranda rolled into the intersection, and then stopped in a queue, waiting for the next red light to change, at the intersection of University and Bayshore Freeway, about 75 yards ahead.

“Is this for real?” said Miranda. “This is the worst city planning I’ve ever seen.”

This is episode 66 of a 72-part fictionalized serial appearing in the Daily Post, written by John Angell Grant.

Because Miranda’s roommate Guy had offered to upgrade her abandoned Southgate garden, she and Valerie were driving to Home Depot in East Palo Alto to get some backyard supplies.

“Both these stoplights were put in 10 years ago,” said Valerie, “When they got rid of Whiskey Gulch. As soon as they put them in, traffic on University Avenue slowed to a crawl.”

Miranda remembered Whiskey Gulch well — the seedy Tenderloin strip just across the East Palo Alto border, where her father got drunk many times. Even in those days Whis-

key Gulch was the relic of an older time, when Stanford enforced rigorous blue laws, and very little alcohol was served in Palo Alto proper.

Because East Palo Alto was a separate community in San Mateo County, however, it blossomed as the dilapidated speakeasy workaround for thirsty Palo Altans, back in the day.

But Palo Alto blue laws had long since changed. So a decade ago Whiskey Gulch was torn down and replaced by “University Circle,” a posh business complex that featured a Four Seasons Hotel and several upscale office high rises.

The light at Woodland changed a third time. Miranda and Valerie rolled forward three more car lengths, and stopped again when the light turned red again.

“Is this an improvement over Whiskey Gulch?” Miranda asked. “You used to be able to drive right through.”

She remembered the days when traffic flowed smoothly toward the Bay on University Avenue, and neither of these red lights existed — just a stop sign.

Now it often took several changes of the lights for autos to make it through the new double stoplight barrier.

She recalled Christi talking earlier in the week about her self-driving car, and how the future of auto transportation lay in “smart highways of the future.” To Miranda, sitting at the stoplight at Woodland and University, smart highways of the future seemed a long way off.

**More tomorrow.**