Marin Conservation League
Walk Into (Conservation) History # 16
THE STORY OF SAVING ALTO BOWL AND HORSE HILL
Saturday, November 8, 2014

Walk Leader
Nona Dennis, Director, Marin Conservation League
Assisted by:
Dick Spotswood, Former Mayor, City of Mill Valley
Janis Bosenko and Tim Leveque, Save Horse Hill Campaign
Today’s Walk

Our walking route begins in the lower parking lot of the Scott Valley Swimming and Tennis Club. We will begin with an introduction by former Mill Valley Mayor Dick Spotswood and MCL Walk Leader Nona Dennis. Joining our walk are Janis Bosenko, who chaired the Save Horse Hill campaign for three years, and Tim Leveque, campaign treasurer.

We will proceed up Coach Road to the junction with Alto Bowl Fire Road and the Bob Middagh Trail, an option for those who wish to extend their hike. This cul-de-sac is one of the trail entries to the Alto Bowl Open Space Preserve.

The route of today’s 1.5 mile walk is shown in red. An out-and-back on the Bob Middagh Trail (top left) is optional.

The initially steep Horse Hill Trail takes us to the top of the ridge just below Meadowcrest in Corte Madera. Horse Hill Trail then proceeds south-east along the ridge to meet the Horse Hill Fire Road. We continue west along the crest of the hill to eventually descend through the woods to our point of origin—approximately a mile and a half. Along the way we will find a school volunteer crew pulling broom under the leadership of Marin County Parks Volunteer Coordinator Greg Reza and some of the owners of horses that call the Hill their home.

Introduction

Some say “it was the horses that saved Horse Hill.” Everyone could relate to horses, and they had been there for decades. On closer look, it was much more: the outpouring of support by a community that loved its natural surroundings, who, with grassroots leadership, dogged persistence, a receptive City Council, supportive staff, a few lawyers, and money—lots of it—managed to save the Hill for the horses! The horses (twelve at present) that grazed on the hillside overlooking Highway 101 and Southern Marin—known as Horse Hill—were oblivious to the battles in City Hall that went on for years. They were, and are still, doing what their predecessors have done on the hillside for several decades—roaming at will to seek out the best grass or the best local climate. If the horses are not imme-
The complete story of Horse Hill would have to begin with the Coast Miwok, who also found the Hill inviting and camped there while gathering shellfish and tubers from nearby marshes. According to Betty Goerke, author of Chief Marin and local expert on Coast Miwok, numerous archaeological sites dot the area of Alto Bowl—under homes in Alto-Sutton neighborhood and Scott Valley, and even under the Edna McGuire School. The complete story would also include the many decades when Scott Valley was a dairy—and even the Depression years when the Hill was occupied by trailer squatters, a real “Hooverville.”

The Setting

Alto Hill (aka Horse Hill) is one of the ridge spurs of Mt. Tamalpais. Were it not split by the cut that created Highway 101, the ridge would be continuous with the Tiburon Peninsula ridge to the south-east. The 55 acres of fenced pasture the horses call home are surrounded by residential neighborhoods. The Alto-Sutton Manor neighborhood on the flats was the first to develop, dating from the 1910s and 20s, when early homes were built around the “Alto Station” on the North Pacific Coast Railroad. Primary development of the Alto-Sutton Manor neighborhood followed WW II and continued into the 1960s. The Sutton Manor portion was annexed into Mill Valley, leaving the Alto portion in the county, but the area functions as a unified neighborhood. Later development of Scott Valley began in the 1960s, and more recent homes have gradually crept up the lower slopes on the Mill Valley side of “Alto Hill,” while homes on Corte Madera’s Meadowcrest ridge form the northeastern boundary of the area. That there remains any open space on the Hill at all is due in large part to the diligence of local residents, supported by thousands intent on saving every acre they could.

Horse Hill occupies the south-facing portion of the 87-acre Alto Bowl Open Space Preserve, (see map)which was acquired by Marin County Open Space District (now Marin County Parks) in 1993. One of the smaller of the County’s 34
Open Space Preserves, Alto Bowl Preserve separates Mill Valley from Corte Madera and offers trail connections to other preserves as well as to lands of Golden Gate National Recreation Area in Southern Marin. The Bob Middagh Trail provides access (across Camino Alto Grade) to “Northridge,” the heart of today’s Camino Alto, Baltimore Canyon, and Baltimore Canyon Preserves, and the watershed lands of Mt. Tam beyond. The Mill Valley-Sausalito Multi-use Path at the base of Horse Hill follows the alignment of the former North Pacific Coast railroad past the Mill Valley waterfront toward Sausalito and the Marin Headlands. The top of Horse Hill affords almost 360-degree views of Mt. Tamalpais, Tiburon Peninsula and the larger San Francisco Bay region.

Camino Alto (Corte Madera Grade) skirts the west side of the preserve, linking Corte Madera and Mill Valley. At one time, the communities were also linked by North Pacific Coast railroad via the Alto Tunnel, whose south portal is several hundred yards west of the Scott Valley Swimming and Tennis Club at the curve of Underhill. Overgrown and difficult to reach on foot, the entry is now blocked by steel, concrete, sand and gravel, following a collapse in 1981 that also seriously damaged a home. When the 2,183 ft. tunnel was opened in 1884, it was considered a landmark in Marin transportation. By directly linking Mill Valley with Corte Madera, it replaced a previous track that had to climb the crest of Collins Summit, the route of today’s 101. Unlike most of the North Pacific Coast Railroad, which was double-tracked, the tunnel was too narrow and forever remained single-tracked. It was a highpoint for thousands of teenagers riding the “School Special” from Ross Valley to and from Tamalpais High School after Tam High opened in 1908 (Barry Spitz, Marin, A History). The Tunnel was sealed and abandoned in 1979, and then re-plugged after the collapse. One-third of the tunnel’s length is now filled in with concrete and gravel, and the remaining internal structure (wood) has likely deteriorated from moisture and lack of oxygen (John Palmer, An Alto Tunnel Primer).

The open space lands of Alto Bowl Preserve are situated so close to residences—some areas literally squeezed between parcels of private property below and along the crest of the preserve—that one finds considerable non-native plant life mixed in with natives. Coast live-oak and bay woodland becomes a thicket of natives, like toyon and coyote brush, mixed with escaped ornamentals like red-berried cotoneaster and the ever-present broom. In winter and spring, one can expect abundant wildflowers such as hound’s tongue in the woodlands, and poppy, blue-eyed grass, iris, lupine, among other grassland species. Coyote, bobcat, fox, raccoon, and deer are frequently sighted here. American kestrels, red-tailed hawks and Northern harriers hunt for rodents and reptiles on the open grassy hillsides.

Horse Hill and Marin Politics in the 1960s

The first efforts to save Horse Hill started in 1961 when local resident Aline McClain learned that Marin Capital Company proposed to build 900 homes on the land, which was zoned for residential development. From 1948, when McClain and her husband moved
to Mill Valley, she had spent much of her time working to protect open space. She went to Southern Marin’s Supervisor J. Walter Blair to see what could be done and was told, in effect, “not to worry her pretty head.” McClain formed the Alto-Sutton Manor District Association and launched the first successful recall of a county supervisor in California. She then helped to get Peter Behr elected to the Board of Supervisors to replace Blair in 1962. Blair’s ouster was a catalyst for a more “liberal shift” on the Board toward protecting the environment during a decade that would bring the threat of Marincello, resort development in Bolinas Lagoon, the West Marin Plan for a community of 150,000 people, and a cross-county freeway. McClain opposed Marincello and eventually prevail in county politics. McClain’s actions to initiate the saving of Horse Hill at the beginning of that decade would contribute to that shift, but saving the Hill itself would take almost three decades, sustained by neighborhood leadership and, by the end of the 1980s, thousands of contributors.

Development Threats

From 1961, the standoff between developers and neighbors in Alto-Sutton Manor ebbed and flowed over the years as three large parcels and one small one—roughly 140 acres—that made up the Hill exchanged hands several times.

Fast-forward to the early 1980s. In 1982, the Huang Brothers brought to the Mill Valley Planning Commission a 61-unit plan for the 34.4 acres they had recently purchased on the east side of the Hill (“Project H”). Project H was opposed by residents of the Alto area primarily due to the project’s impact on traffic, drainage, and slope stability.

In the same period a second proposal was under consideration for the west side of the Hill—the “Cal-Fong” proposal by Al Von der Werth to develop the Hill above the Scott Valley neighborhood. If both proposals were approved, up to 162 homes could be built on the hill where the horses were grazing, oblivious to the threat. Both proposals had development histories spanning two decades. One neighbor said: “If I had a nickel for every hour I’ve spent at meetings about Alto Hill since 1961, my husband could retire!”

Mill Valley was also updating its General Plan in the 1980s, and in 1986 decided to impose a two-year moratorium on any new development on the Hill until the new Plan could address basic questions concerning the appropriate number of homes on the Hill. At the end of the moratorium in early 1988, and after endless back and forth between City and developer and threats of legal action on questions of density and access, Von der Werth’s original proposal for up to 100 homes had been trimmed to about half, allowing home development clustered in two nodes at the base of the Hill on about one-third of the property—leaving the remaining land as open space. The basic leverage that allowed the City to reduce development so markedly had been the issue of access. By 1989, that development was under construction. Project H, on the other hand, was not destined to go that route. According to the new General Plan, Project H could have built 13 homes at the base of the Hill, but the Alto-Sutton Manor District Association was not interested in any further development. They were gearing up to save the rest of Horse Hill!

Saving Horse Hill

To initiate the acquisition of Project H as open space, the Association established the “Save Horse Hill” Fund in December 1988, with $2,000 from the Association’s own general fund. Aline McClain was one of the first to contribute seed money. The Association sought political support from both City of Mill Valley (the entire Hill is within the City limits) and Supervisor Al Aramburu from the Southern Marin district. His advice: “The community must show Marin County Open Space District you are serious by demonstrating broad community support.” With no non-profit agent to enable tax deductions, the Association was active in the 1969 “Save Our Seashore” campaign to purchase the lands that make up Pt. Reyes National Seashore. She was a member of Marin County Parks and Recreation Commission and a long-standing member of Marin Conservation League.

A slow-growth sentiment would
The community nonetheless was able to gather $100,000 from an initial mailing just to Southern Marin residents. The Association then aligned itself with a local non-profit “Health and Habitat,” which thereafter served as a repository for “Save Horse Hill” funds.

Coincidently, State Proposition 70 (Wildlife, Coastal, and Park Land Conservation Bond Act of 1988) had passed that year, designating $776 million dollars for a wide range of preservation projects throughout the state. Due to effective local lobbying, the Bond had designated $21 million for Marin County, and $1.6 million for Mill Valley, the only city to receive a special designation.

Public response to the preliminary fund-raising effort prompted the County of Marin Open Space District to make this land acquisition a priority. In December 1988, the Mill Valley City Council, led by Mayor Dick Spotswood, with staff support from City Manager Doug Dawson and Planning Director Don Dickenson, also made preservation of Horse Hill a priority and approached the landowners with offers to purchase the land. The owners refused to entertain purchase offers, and in May 1989, the City Council decided to obtain the land through eminent domain proceedings against the absentee landowners.

At trial, the jury set the price of the land at $2.4 million, $530,000 more than the City had offered but $900,000 less than the property owners’ appraisal. The city set aside $1 million from its Prop. 70 windfall, and the County offered $.8 million from the same source. The balance would be up to the community.

The Save Horse Hill committee generated tremendous community support in raising funds. Somewhere between 5,000 and 7,000 individuals contributed, including local residents with children who loved seeing the horsies on the hill, and the campaign ultimately raised almost $600,000. But as the deadline of October 26, 1990, approached, it was evident that the community’s contribution would be about $240,000 short. The City agreed to “borrow” the needed balance out of the remaining Proposition 70 funds, with the understanding that, if additional community contributions were not forthcoming, the city could sell off one and a half acres to reimburse their Prop. 70 fund.

Thus, on a grassy hillside on Sunday, Memorial Day in 1991, a crowd gathered with Mayor Dick Spotswood, to celebrate acquisition of the land. Two years later Mill Valley donated the land to the Marin County Open Space District, who permanently preserved it as open space. In the meantime, the Save Horse Hill campaign carried on, with new leadership, and eventually, bolstered by a challenge grant from Marin Community Foundation and additional help from the Board of Supervisors, completed its commitment.

As an ironic post-script to the event, surveyors from the Marin Municipal Water District appeared almost the next day, in their search for a site to construct a one-million-gallon water tank directly adjacent to the newly-minted open space preserve. “It may be Horse Hill to you,” said the engineers in response to cries of outrage from the community, the city and the county, “but to us it is simply the right elevation for a much-needed new water tank for Southern Marin”! That prompted another lengthy
George Goheen, who let Howe keep his horse Mr. Jiggs on the land in exchange for taking care of the property. The pasturing of other horses evolved from “Valley Riders,” young equestrians who were part of the Mill Valley 4H Club. According to Howe, “a few of us promised to take care of the Hill . . . It was a nonprofit deal for kids who couldn’t afford to have a horse otherwise.”

Mr. Jiggs died in 1982 at the age of 35 or 36, and land ownership changed three times in almost 30 years, while Howe continued to manage the horses — feeding, fixing fences, digging springs, giving shots, handling insurance. It was (and continues to be) one of the most popular and affordable places in Southern Marin to keep a horse. In the early days, there was always a waiting list, often up to four or five years.

Alto Bowl Horseowners’ Association

Following the acquisition of Horse Hill by the MCOSD, it was only natural that horses would remain on Horse Hill. Thanks to a 1993 arrangement between Marin County Parks and ABHA, fourteen horses are able to graze on 55 acres — continuing the decades-long use on the property. ABHA is responsible for costs and management of the herd and all equestrian facilities — shelters, corrals, hitch rails, manure bunker, fences and other horse-related improvements. ABHA volunteers also work with County Parks, school groups, and other volunteers in waging an ongoing battle against French broom and other invasive, exotic plants and restoring the preserve’s habitats.

The “manure bunker,” visible from Highway 101, is especially popular with local organic gardeners and is available to anyone with a shovel and bucket or truck July through January. Water for the horses is a current issue, however. Because two historic natural springs on the hill have dried up, ABHA had to pay a neighbor to use his water. The group recently engaged in a campaign — “Buy A Horse A Drink”—to raise funds for a pipeline to bring in municipal water. It was a great success, and now the horses have an assured supply in all seasons!

According to Robert Eichstaedt, President of the ABHA, people and dogs are welcomed on Horse Hill with little interference from the horses. “The horses simply ask that the dogs stay with their human companions, either on leash or by voice control.”
MCL Walks into Conservation History

Permanent protection of land does not happen easily; every piece of parkland and open space that the public can now enjoy in Marin came at a price in human effort and persistence as well as in funds from many different sources.

To commemorate its 75th Anniversary in 2009, Marin Conservation League initiated a series of Walks into the park and open space lands that have come to define almost 50 percent of Marin’s landscape. This year is MCL’s 80th Anniversary, and we continue to commemorate the visionaries who recognized many decades ago that Marin’s significant natural lands and waters and cultural heritage would not survive for future generations unless they were permanently protected.

Since its founding in 1934, MCL, working with many other organizations and thousands of individuals, has played a significant role in many of these stories. The Walks have been generously funded by the following, who donated to MCL’s History Book Fund in 2009:

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- Bank of Marin
- Nona Dennis
- Cordy Hill, *in memory of Robert Royston*

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**LUPINE $100—$249**
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