Marin Conservation League
Walk Into (Conservation) History #15
Saturday, May 3, 2014
Conserving South Tiburon Ridge
Old St. Hilary’s Landmark and Wildflower Preserve
Old St. Hilary’s Open Space Preserve
Tiburon Upland Nature Preserve
The Martha Company Property

Walk Leaders
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Marin Conservation League was founded in 1934 to preserve, protect and enhance the natural assets of Marin County.
Today’s Walk

Tiburon Peninsula extends approximately four miles in a southeasterly direction from its connection to the Marin “mainland” at Highway 101. Along the spine, or ridge, of the peninsula are a number of lands, including Ring Mountain Open Space Preserve, that have escaped development, generally after persistent and lengthy battles. The Walk today explores lands at the southeastern end of the Tiburon Peninsula Ridge (South Tiburon Ridge) that are already conserved, as well as lands that are still privately-owned and the subject of an active development proposal.

The public and private “open spaces” on South Tiburon Ridge form a complex of four parts. The first piece to be acquired as public open space – **Tiburon Uplands Nature Preserve**, whose acquisition in 1958 was initiated by Marin Conservation League – is a 24-acre heavily wooded piece of land that descends from the ridge to Paradise Drive. It was once a property of the “Net Depot” (see below) and is now owned and managed by Marin County Open Space District. It can be accessed either by a trail that descends steeply from the ridgeline, or from Paradise Drive. Geographically separated from the Uplands Preserve is the **Old St. Hilary’s Landmark and Wildlife Preserve** (formerly Old St. Hilary’s church, pictured above right), which was acquired in the same time frame (1959) by the newly-formed Belvedere-Tiburon Landmarks Society. It encompasses five acres. The adjoining 122 acres of public land – **Old St. Hilary’s Open Space Preserve**, also known as the Harroman and Jay properties after the original landowners – were acquired in the late 1990s and are managed.

**Route:** Park at end of Lyford. Moderately strenuous 1-mile, with ups and downs – up Lyford Fire Road to meet Heathcliff Fire Road, continue to Martha Company property line. Return on unnamed trail to end of Lyford.

**Optional Walks:** Access Tiburon Upland Nature Preserve from Heathcliff Fire Road on a narrow trail for a strenuous one-mile loop (450-foot elevation down and up); or access Old St. Hilary’s Landmark and Wildflower Preserve from Vistazo West, via Vistazo Fire road and trail to Old St. Hilary’s and John Thomas Howell Botanical Garden.
by the Marin County Open Space District. The preserve extends approximately from Tiburon Peninsula Club to the top of the ridge, where it connects with the Tiburon Uplands Preserve. Finally, the fourth piece in the complex is the Martha Property—110 acres of prime undeveloped land that occupies the southern tip of the Tiburon Ridge down to Paradise Drive. It is often assumed to be part of Old St. Hilary’s Open Space; a fence and “No Trespassing” sign separate it from public land. Currently under threat from a major residential development (“Easton Point”), the Martha property has for many years, been a target for public acquisition. The focus of our walk is on the possible future acquisition of this prime land. With its rare plants and spectacular vistas of the Bay Region, the property offers an unsurpassed opportunity for the enjoyment of future generations!

All of these sites are vivid reminders of Tiburon’s history and each is ecologically enriched by the others’ presence.

**Tiburon Peninsula’s Transformation**

Since its earliest habitation by Coast Miwok for at least five thousand years, the Tiburon Peninsula has undergone huge transformations. One of the most significant was the dividing of Marin into 21 enormous ranchos awarded by Mexico between 1834 and 1846. In 1843, the 8,878-acre Rancho Corte Madera del Presidio, which occupied all of Tiburon Peninsula and Belvedere, Corte Madera, old Larkspur to Corte Madera Creek opposite the site of College of Marin, and roughly half of Mill Valley, was awarded to John Reed, Marin’s first non-Hispanic resident and first private landowner. His descendants played a large part in County life for decades after, and sizable parcels on Tiburon Peninsula remained in family hands for well over a century, largely in cattle ranching.

The railroad came to Tiburon in 1882. A railroad terminal connected Northwestern Pacific Railroad trains with ferries carrying commuters and automobiles to San Francisco and Sausalito, while barges carried loaded freight cars to San Francisco and Richmond. The last railroad operated passenger ferry left Tiburon in 1941, but the passenger and freight trains ran until 1967. The railroad yard was heavily used as a maintenance yard well into the 1960s. The former railroad yards were transformed into the “Point Tiburon” residential and commercial development in the 1980s, and the former railroad grade now forms part of the San Francisco Bay Trail and Tiburon’s waterfront multi-use path (now old Railroad Grade).

After World War II, the descendants of the Reed family, who still controlled most of the land, had begun to sell off areas of filled land near the Bay to create subdivisions and to subdivide the Reed Ranch by the time the County finally began preparing a Master Plan for the Tiburon Peninsula. Completed in 1956 after much public debate,
the Master Plan had something for everyone: freeways on both sides of the peninsula, a four lane “ridge route” down the center of the peninsula (with a high-level bridge over Trestle Glen Boulevard), a shopping center on the crest of Ring Mountain, and a bridge to San Francisco (via Angel Island and Alcatraz). A land-use density of two homes to the acre, plus areas zoned for apartments, would have permitted 50,000 to 60,000 people to live in Tiburon.

In 1963, after earlier attempts to incorporate failed, voters elected to create the City of Tiburon (later changed to Town) in March 1964, citing the need to revise the 1956 Master Plan, improve police services, oppose the bridge to San Francisco, preserve open space, and establish responsive local government. In June the incorpora-

Tiburon Uplands Nature Preserve and the “Net Depot” (Optional Walk)

In chronology, the Tiburon Uplands Nature Preserve was the first of the four areas to become public open space on the South Ridge. It is a nature preserve, rather than a developed park. Its wooded acres are tucked into a canyon along Paradise Drive, about one mile south of Paradise Beach Park. A short but strenuous one mile loop trail winds through mature oak-bay woodlands and a variety of native plants and animal habitats. From higher elevations, it affords excellent bay views. The property adjoins the Old St. Hilary’s Open Space Preserve near the ridgeline and is accessible either from Paradise Drive, opposite the Romberg Tiburon Center (“Net Depot”) or by a narrow trail from Heathcliff Fire Road on the ridge. The story of its acquisition is intimately tied to the history of the eastern side of the peninsula and the “Net Depot.”

It is difficult to imagine the industrial activities that the Paradise side of the peninsula has endured since the Reed Family operated a brick kiln in the 1860s when explosives were produced on the Peninsula. In 1877, the Union Fish Company purchased land from the Reed Family and operated a cod fishery until 1904, when they relocated to Sausalito and sold the property to the United States Navy. During that time period, ship breaking and
salvage was a major industry on the east shore.

America’s Navy, expanding its presence in the Pacific, used the site as a coaling (refueling) station; coal arrived by ship and was stored in massive mounds before being moved to u-shaped piers and loaded onto ships. In 1931, with the U.S. fleet converted to oil, the coaling station closed, and the site was leased to the State for the California Nautical School, forerunner of today’s California Maritime Academy. In 1933, contractors for the Golden Gate Bridge construction acquired a deepwater cove just to the north where ships unloaded steel wire, which was twisted and compressed to form the bridge’s massive cables.

In August 1940, in anticipation of war, the Navy reclaimed its former coaling station as a net building depot. (The Maritime School moved to Vallejo, where it remains). The largest of the nets made there, 156,000 tons and seven miles long, was placed across the San Francisco Bay early in WW II to guard against enemy submarines entering the Bay. In 1942, the Net Depot took over the cable-fabricating site and added 19 acres just north at Paradise Cove as a Floating Drydock Training Annex. Thousands of naval personnel were housed at the Net Depot during training. Finally, late in the War, the Navy had plans to clear 3,600 acres, most all of the Tiburon Peninsula (save for the downtown area) for an ammunition supply station. Fortunately, World War II came to an end, and the Navy closed the Net Depot, only to reactivate it during the Korean conflict.

By 1957, a part of the Net Depot west of Paradise Drive had been declared surplus. Mary Summers, then County Planning Director, felt it would be a valuable addition to county park lands. She suggested this to Caroline Livermore, who immediately arranged for it to be put on the Supervisors’ agenda, and MCL formally began urging the County to acquire it as a park. Mrs. Livermore confided to Mary Summers that the red suit she was wearing that day was to make sure the Supervisors noticed her. The two women sat in the front row and made a pitch for buying the Net Depot at half-price, which public agencies were qualified to do. The supervisors turned them down.

Once out in the hall, Mrs. Livermore turned to Mary, and said: “I believe in this enough to guarantee it,” and they walked back in. She put up her own funds, and the Supervisors agreed to pay $20,000 (half the cost), and MCL later raised funds to reimburse Mrs. Livermore. This undeveloped park is now the Tiburon Uplands Nature Preserve.

The Net Depot was officially decommissioned in 1964. The U.S. Dept of the Interior established an oceanographic center (now called NOAA), which shares the site with San Francisco State University’s marine and estuarine research center – Romberg Tiburon Center. The 19 acres of the former Drydock Annex became Paradise Beach County Park, fulfilling another of MCL’s long-term goals.

Old St. Hilary's Landmark (Optional Walk)

The heirs of John Reed deeded one-quarter acre for a church for $2.00 to the Archdiocese of San Francisco, which built the little church as a place of worship for local railroad workers in 1888. By 1919 the church became part of the parish of Star of the Sea in Sausalito.

With the construction of a new St. Hilary’s Catholic Church on the Tiburon Peninsula in 1954 the old mission was de-sanctified. In spite of its significant architectural importance as one of the few remaining Carpenter Gothic churches to survive in its original setting, the church was headed for destruction, and by 1959 the old building was in a sad state. Beverly Bastian of Belvedere and Susanna Dakin of Tiburon formed the Belvedere-Tiburon Landmarks Society to raise the funds and take title to the building and grounds.

A plaque marks the Caroline S. Livermore Vista Point.
The land adjacent to and surrounding Old St. Hilary’s Landmark is home to several rare plants, including the Tiburon paintbrush, Tiburon buckwheat, Marin dwarf flax and the black jewel flower, which exists only in serpentine on the tip of the Tiburon Peninsula. Botanist John Thomas Howell identified 217 species of ferns and seed-bearing plants, two-thirds of them native (endemic) to the area. Of the total number of native plants growing on the Tiburon Peninsula, more than one-third are present at Old St. Hilary’s. The rarity and profusion of plants is a result of the preserve’s geology, which includes steep hill-sides of serpentine, level areas of deeper soil and a series of fresh-water springs.

Old St. Hilary’s was dedicated as an historical monument on October 30th, 1960. An early step was to form a wildflower preserve and through joint efforts, acquire land encompassing the wildflower garden site to prevent development of two apartment buildings that had already been approved by the County. It came to be known as the John Thomas Howell Botanical Garden, in honor of the author of the original Marin Flora. The preserve was taken over by the Marin County Open Space District and dedicated to Caroline S. Livermore, founder of the Marin Conservation League and environmental visionary who had done so much to preserve open space in Marin County.

**Old St. Hilary’s Open Space Preserve**

The story of saving Old St. Hilary’s Open Space Preserve and its acquisition by Marin County Open Space District, is long and tangled, as these lands represented some of the most desirable property for development in Marin. Early plans in 1988 would have resulted in 70 half-acre lots (“Marinero Estates”) on the 101-acre Harroman property and 47 units (“Terraces”) on the 15.8-acre Jay property. From these proposed plans to the eventual outcome, in which the townspeople of Tiburon and Belvedere passed two separate bond measures, in 1993 and 1997, to save the lands, lies a convoluted series of battles between developers, the IRS, and the Town, which became determined to saved the lands from development, or at least negotiate for lesser development.

Much of the success of the bond elections is due to the Last Chance Committee, precursor to Tiburon Open Space Committee – a determined group of local citizens motivated to protect Tiburon’s heritage and special community landscapes. Many were also members of Belvedere-Tiburon Landmarks society, which also played a significant role in promoting the bond measures. For example, members of the Landmarks Society placed story poles next to the Old St. Hilary’s Landmark to highlight how close buildings could be built on adjoining property if it were developed. This sight shocked and galvanized most of Tiburon, as many believed the adjoining lands were already protected.

The bond measures produced $6.5 million. Additional funds ($1.4 million) were supplied by Tiburon, Marin Community Foundation and the County, which made the eventual $7.9 million acquisition, at that time, the most expensive Marin County Open Space purchase.

Today, this 122-acre preserve is the only place to see the extremely rare Tiburon jewelflower. This may be seen in mid-May along the
Vistazo Fire Road, which traverses the lower portion of the preserve. A small, steep trail connects the lower route to the Heathcliff Fire Road, which crosses the upper slope. Views from the top of the hill (where the preserve adjoins the Tiburon Uplands Preserve) are spectacular. In 2012, the MCOSD commemorated the 15th anniversary of the final acquisition that created the Old St. Hilary’s Preserve.

**Martha Company Property (aka “Easton Point Residential Development”)**

The 110-acre Martha Company property lies at the southeastern tip of Tiburon Ridge, directly adjacent to Old St. Hilary’s Preserve. The property is in the unincorporated County, but lies within the Tiburon Planning Area. It is the last remaining undeveloped land in the Tiburon Planning Area, and one of the last pieces of available, undeveloped land in Southern Marin. Although marked as “Private Property” it is accessible by walkers and their dogs. Otherwise it is relatively undisturbed.

The property is characterized by steep slopes, heavily wooded with oak on the north-east-facing slopes, and with grassland and rock outcroppings on the west and southwest-facing slopes. Elevations range from about 150 feet at Paradise Road to 600-plus feet on the upper ridges. Views encompass Angel Island in the foreground, and the expanse of Bay Area beyond, in an almost 360-degree arc. Three small inholdings lie within the property: an MMWD one-million-gallon water tank accessed from Paradise Drive; an acre containing a spring owned by the Keil Family that feeds water to the Keil Garden Pond below Paradise Drive; and a single-family private residence on Paradise Drive.

The Reed family that owns the property is descended from John L. Reed, who bought the land in 1923. The property is named for John Reed’s daughter Martha. (This John Reed family bears no relationship to the original John Reed, who was granted Rancho Corte Madera del Presidio.)

The Martha Property has been the subject of lawsuits and contention since 1974, when the County attempted to down-zone the property pursuant to its reduced development potential in the Countywide Plan. Martha Co. sued the County for an unlawful “taking” of the property. In 1976, Martha and the County settled by signing a stipulated judgment that would allow 43 residences on minimum half-acre lots, leaving no more than 48 percent of the land in open space. After several false starts, the company filed an application with Tiburon in April 1994 for 49 homes on 125 acres, including 44 on the uplands, and five along Paradise Drive. EIRs were submitted to Tiburon, but twice Martha walked away when the environmental impacts became clear. In 2005, Martha submitted its application to the County, referencing the stipulated judgment. In 2006, the County rejected the application and challenged the 30-year-old settlement, claiming that too much time had passed for it to remain valid. In 2007 a federal court upheld the original judgment, and ordered the County to process a new application allowing at least 43 units, in accordance with the 1976 judgment.

Tiburon has long taken a mixed interest in either developing the Martha property because it abuts existing neighborhoods, or in conserving it as open space, in that it adjoins the Old St. Hilary’s Preserve. Eventually it is likely the land will be annexed into the town. In 2009, after 35 years of legal battles and court opinions, negotiations between the Town of Tiburon and the Martha Co. produced an alternative that was also analyzed in a Draft EIR. Rather than 43 residences, 32 could be approved, their size increased, however, to upwards of 10,000 square feet, compared to a maximum house size of 8,750 square feet under the 43-unit plan. This alternative would pull development off the ridgeline and cluster houses to allow for more than 50 percent of public open space that would include existing fire road trail access points from the adjacent Open Space Preserve.

As the Tiburon Open Space Committee and its allies, including
MCL, have followed the tortuous path of environmental review for “Easton Pt.” development (a Final EIR is pending certification as the County Supervisors await hearings on the merits of the project and how the many impacts might be mitigated), they have cited the myriad constraints that would make any development of the site difficult, hazardous, and costly. Among the constraints are twenty-seven landslides that have been mapped on the property. Access for construction equipment and vehicles would require either traversing the narrow streets of Old Tiburon and Hill Haven neighborhoods or accessing the site along the winding Paradise Drive, which is heavily used by bicycles, and up a proposed “temporary” construction road at a 25 percent grade to reach the upper ridges. A new water tank would be constructed at an elevation sufficient for water pressure, making it visually prominent on the ridgeline. Significant grading on the property for large building sites would result in removal of 742 trees (applicant’s estimate), and several building sites would remove habitat of endangered plant species. Finally, disrupting water sources to the spring owned by the Keil family would compromise breeding habitat of the federal-listed threatened California red-legged frog in the Keil Pond.

These are the most egregious challenges facing development of the site. In addition Martha Property has been identified as a “Priority Conservation Area” in a regional study of potential development and conservation locations by the Association of Bay Area Governments. And it is targeted as one of ten potential land conservation areas in the current Marin County Parks and Open Space Strategic Plan.

Taken together, the constraints and the values add up to a picture in which acquisition as open space offers the most rational solution. The Open Space Committee hopes to purchase the Martha Property at its fair market value once the true costs of developing it are identified. Fair market value reflects not only the value of the real estate, but also the real world costs to build on this difficult site. Therefore, Marin Conservation League supports efforts by the Tiburon Open Space Committee to raise funds to preserve as open space all or parts of the Martha Co. property on Tiburon Ridge, for eventual acquisition by a public agency or conservation organization.

Sources:
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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:

**MOUNTAIN LION $2500 or more**

- Bunker & Company
- Ken Drexler & Sarah Leach

**COOPER’S HAWK $1000—$2499**

- The County of Marin
- Marin County Parks
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**ELK $500—$999**

- Angel Island Association
- Bank of Marin
- Nona Dennis
- Cordy Hill, in memory of Robert Royston

**BAY LAUREL $250—$499**

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