

Marin Conservation League's Walk Into History #4

Corte Madera Shoreline

Saturday, March 27, 2010, 9:30 am---1:00 pm

MCL's Nona Dennis, Corte Madera historian Jana Haehl, and wetlands biologist Kathy Cuneo lead a walk along Corte Madera Shoreline. Stories include "Heerdt Marsh," which MCL helped to save from development in the 1970s; the successful restoration of "Muzzi Marsh" to mitigate dredging for Larkspur Ferry Terminal; and other battles that have reshaped the wetlands of Corte Madera Shoreline area.

Route for Today's Walk

Our walk begins at the eastern end of Industrial Way, near Cost-Plus, at the old railroad grade crossing; it continues east past "Heerdt Marsh," now the northernmost part of the Corte Madera Ecological Reserve; around the semi-circular edge of the filled "Green Property" and back to the railroad right-of-way path; south, then east along the edge of the 72-acre Golden Gate Bridge District (GGBD) parcel to the northern end of the restored 128-acre "Muzzi Marsh," now also part of C.M. Ecological Reserve; south along the bayward side of the GGBD site; return to the railroad path opposite The Village Shopping Center. The walk concludes by returning north along the railroad grade to Industrial Way. For those who wish to, the walk can be extended south and east to visit Marta's Marsh.

What does today's "Corte Madera's Shoreline" include?

One hundred and fifty years ago, the upland boundary for Corte Madera's changing shoreline would have been approximately Magnolia and College Avenues, and Sir Francis Drake Boulevard. Until the late 19th century, the meandering Corte Madera Creek was navigable to Ross Landing near College of Marin, and tidal marshes and sloughs covered virtually all of the lower Ross Valley.

The first major shift in that boundary came in the late 19th century, with the construction of Corte Madera's *third* railroad – San Francisco & North Pacific Railroad (The first was a North Pacific Coast Railroad that climbed up and over Alto Hill, winding through the Meadowsweet area to the train station in Old Corte Madera Square; and the second was the 'new' North Pacific Coast Railroad, from Sausalito and Mill Valley through the Alto Tunnel.) The SF&NP extended from Point Tiburon ferry terminal, under Ring Mountain, and northward to San Rafael along a newly-built dike across the Corte Madera marshlands, roughly separating what's now The Village shopping center from Muzzi Marsh on the east.

The next "boundary" – the one that defines today's Walk – was the new state highway (now U.S. 101) whose construction began in 1929. The Meadowsweet Dairy owners had drained and turned into hayfields and cattle grazing large portions of the marshlands west of the railroad in the late 1920s. Fill for the new highway was placed across the pastures of Meadowsweet and tidelands to the north, and by 1930, the two-lane highway was complete.

The real changes that begin our story did not come until after World War II, in the early 1950s, when towns like Corte Madera were under intense pressure to allow tract development. Tidelands offered the opportunity for relatively inexpensive development, involving little more than carving out huge chunks of earth from the surrounding hillsides to fill the marshes. Until that time, Corte Madera had been a hillside town situated above the marshes and clustered around Corte Madera Station on the other railroad line. That all changed with the post-War population boom.

First came Marina Village on San Clemente Creek east of the highway on Paradise Drive, then Madera Gardens, west of the highway, followed by more development along San Clemente Creek in the 1960s. Industrial buildings also were built on filled land at the southern and northern corners of the marsh. To the west, Ross Valley marshes up to College of Marin continued to be filled. (On this Walk we will not see any of these developments.) And so, over a period of two decades, the rapid filling of the lower Ross Valley transformed the landscape, reducing wetlands to a fraction of their former extent. At the same time, dikes had been constructed in the 1950s by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers from San Clemente Creek to Heerdt Marsh, in preparation for more filling and eventual development along the highway corridor.

(INSERT PLATES 2 AND 3)

The 1970s – Beginning of “wetland consciousness.”

Today’s story covers what remains of the Ross Valley marshes east of Hwy 101. That any wetlands remain at all is testament to the gradual shift in environmental consciousness that began the 1970s and the tenacity of Marin Conservation League, Marin Audubon Society, Corte Madera citizens, and other activists to minimize further losses. The present (2010) configuration of developed and undeveloped marshland east of 101 was generally shaped by events of the 1970s and 1980s, and while important shifts in habitats have occurred since then and the shoreline has eroded, the basic layout set in those decades is pretty much what one sees today.

The events can be divided into five areas, or “stories,” briefly summarized below.

1. Underwater tideland lots in Corte Madera Bay. Fearing another massive development as had threatened Richardson Bay near “Blackie’s Pasture” and the Richardson Bay Audubon Center in the late 1950s, MCL, in the 1960s, purchased several underwater tidal lots to prevent further filling and development of the Corte Madera Bay. These were eventually divested by MCL after the Bay Conservation and Development Commission (BCDC) gained regulatory authority over bay fill.

2. “Heerdt Marsh” (Corte Madera Ecological Reserve) Greenbrae Boardwalk resident Lee Miller, in the early 1970s, was aware that William Heerdt, owner of the tidal salt marsh at the mouth of Corte Madera Creek since the 1940s, was planning to develop the marsh. Wetland preservation hadn't yet become a widely used term in the early 1970s when, at Miller’s urging, Marin Conservation League established a fund designated for acquisition and permanent preservation of the marsh. Home to the endangered California clapper rail and salt marsh harvest mouse, the 92-acre Heerdt Marsh was the last remnant of the once-extensive salt marsh system along the Bay in southern Marin. At the time, the owner was promoting a major development plan that included a marina, boatyard, and water-sport complex.

MCL reached out to community activists who had recently formed a grassroots organization dedicated to halting rampant development in Corte Madera and offered MCL's support for their conservation goals. MCL had already drawn attention to the Heerdt Marsh by local agencies such as BCDC, which had been created by the California Legislature in 1965 in response to broad

public concern over the future of San Francisco Bay. Meanwhile, local environmental activists generated support from a key legislative leader, State Senator John Burton, whose involvement boosted preservation of the pristine Heerdt Marsh as a priority at the State level.

When owner William Heerdt brought a lawsuit in an attempt to boost approval of his development plan, the State Attorney General's office took up the fight and successfully defended efforts to preserve the marsh and its ecological value. Permanent protection, however, depended on getting the land into public ownership. That became possible when MCL's acquisition seed money was significantly augmented by the State, drawing purchase funding from oil spill reparation fines paid by the company responsible for a recent oil spill that had damaged the Bay ecosystem.

Today, the Heerdt Marsh is part of the Corte Madera Ecological Reserve, overseen by the California Department of Fish and Game. MCL is justifiably proud of the role it had in preserving this precious wetland.

3. Green Property Shown on maps and the Corte Madera General Plan as Madera Bay Park, this roughly five-acre site was filled in the 1950s and operated as Holtzinger Brothers Grading & Disposal site until purchased by Frank Green in the late 1970s. Numerous development proposals, including affordable housing, and several lawsuits over the past few decades have cast a cloud of uncertainty over its ultimate use. The current General Plan shows the 5.2 acre site zoned for Professional and Administrative Office development, but Bayland Risk and Natural Habitat Overlay zones serve as constraints on development at this time.

4. Larkspur Ferry Terminal and Muzzi Marsh Mitigation Site. The Golden Gate Bridge District (GGBD) began studying four sites for a ferry terminal around 1970 – one on Point St. Quentin, one in Larkspur, and two further south along Corte Madera shoreline. MCL, joined by League of Women Voters, Sierra Club, and Marin Audubon Society, were strongly opposed to the Larkspur site because of its dredging requirements. The Bridge District preferred the Larkspur site for its superior access. Only when the Bridge District agreed to purchase roughly 200 acres of the diked Muzzi property and restore two-thirds to tidal action as mitigation, did the organizations withdraw their opposition. See RESTORED SALT MARSH: History, below.

Aerial photos show that about 72 acres of the overall site were diked-off to contain dredge materials that could not be disposed of in-Bay. This dredge disposal site, still owned by the Bridge District, has had a different fate from the restored marsh. The GGBD had development plans at various times for the site, which has a somewhat higher elevation than the marsh. But the clayey dredge spoils act as an impervious substrate and hold rain water throughout the rainy season. As a consequence, much of the site still qualifies as wetland, regulated by several agencies. The area has been invaded by pampas grass, other invasive plants, and jack-rabbits and dogs. It is hardly an example of native habitat, but it offers beautiful (and quiet!) views of the bay.

5. The Village (“Hahn Shopping Center”) and Shorebird Marsh

The shopping center that became The Village was first proposed by Ernest Hahn in the early 1970s. The Hahn site lies between 101 and the railroad grade. At that time it was low and wet, although it had been diked off from the tides by the Corps of Engineers in the 1950s and contained the local headquarters of the California Highway Patrol. The original plan called for about 67 acres of shops and parking, all of it in diked wetlands. This was in the early days of the

California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), and Environmental Impact Reports (EIRs) of that day were thin in all respects! Environmentalists, including MCL and Corte Madera activists went into action, and over several years, with three referendums and several lawsuits, just half of the original land area was permitted for construction, which went forward in the 1980s. The Village is currently owned by Macerich, a nationwide corporation that is also owner of Northgate Mall. The overflow parking lot is owned by the Town of Corte Madera.

To enable construction of the shopping center, the developer was required to mitigate habitat loss and flooding problems that have long plagued low-lying Highway 101 near Lucky Drive. “Shorebird Marsh” was developed for that purpose – as both flood detention basin and habitat. The shopping center was underlain by a geo-textile material to “wick” storm water away from the site and into the flood basin. The long, inland basin that separates the Village from the railroad grade path widens to the north to become the roughly 31-acre Shorebird Marsh. The basin receives a “managed” tidal regime: that is, the water level is drawn down in advance of storms to create flood capacity, and during the rest of the year it receives tidal waters through tide gates operated by Corte Madera Public Works. As a consequence of the managed regime, the mudflats remain mostly unvegetated. This doesn’t stop white pelicans and species of waterfowl and shorebirds, including avocets, from using the area for refuge. And waders like herons and egrets can be seen year round foraging in the neighboring waters.

Marta’s Marsh and Triangle Marsh . These small but important tidal marshes lie to the south. They will have to be part of another walk, when their stories will be told. Both are easily accessed on foot.