



In clear and quiet weather each dwelling enjoyed an unobstructed view of the Bay, and the opening into the Pacific seemed so wide and ample that every resident, from Temescal to San Pablo, claimed for his own house the distinction of being "exactly opposite the Golden Gate."

Edward B. Payne (1898)

EXACTLY OPPOSITE THE GOLDEN GATE

Essays on Berkeley's History

1 8 4 5 • 1 9 4 5



Edited by Phil McArdle

THE BERKELEY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

THE BEACH

Before technology came to Berkeley in the mid-nineteenth century, a fine beach stretched in a smooth arc from the mouth of Strawberry Creek to the rock known as Fleming's Point, nearly a mile north (where Golden Gate Fields is now).

Just to the east of the beach, and following the sand dune northward from Virginia Street, was an interesting salt marsh teeming with crawdads and crabs, as local historian Louis Stein testifies. The balance of natural forces that placed the sand there sealed off Virginia and Codornices creeks from direct access to the Bay and they flowed slowly

into the Bay northeast of Fleming's Point.

The tidal action coming through the Golden Gate and the northwesterly winds formed a natural bowl along the coast between University Avenue and Fleming's Point where sand collected. Tidal action cleaned the sand; lighter material was washed away in the flow of the Bay.

There was a lot of sand, so much sand that in 1874 Captain James Jacobs, of the Heywood and Jacobs Lumber Mill, thought there was an unlimited supply. According to the late Paul Spenger, Sam Heywood sold sand for fifty cents a load, whether it was a wheelbarrow or a wagon load.

Although buildings began to encroach on the tidelands, the beach nevertheless remained pleasurable for many years and was used as a weekend picnic spot by San Franciscans who wanted relief from their cold summers.

Paul Spenger remembered hauling in good catches of fish from the beach when a boat was not available. Sometimes he left his nets piled on the sand.

Gertrude Wilkes Burdick, who grew up on Sixth Street, remembers Berkeley Beach fondly and remembers taking walks up the beach and over to McKeever Hill (which is now called Albany Hill). Other old-timers remember swimming from the Berkeley Pier to Fleming's Point.

At that time, West Berkeley was a sprawling town

and an active center for trade. As it became important as an industrial center, things which were merely nice were converted into moneymaking enterprises. Thus, the town which was at first very close to its beach grew more distant. Willow Grove Park gave way to the El Dorado Oil Works and Spenger's Fish Market. Sand was sold and eventually the seashore became a highway. Fleming's Point became a racetrack.

Today sand still accumulates on the Bay floor and in a couple of places south of Berkeley's landfill, but the harsh angular projections of modern landfills have created many places where only mud and plastic debris collect. Perhaps in a hundred years a stable beach could form.

A hint of what the old beach was like can be seen at the southwest corner of University and Frontage Road near where vegetables are sold on weekends. Walking west through the weeds, one can see where Strawberry Creek empties into the Bay. To the left is a beach perhaps twenty meters across and ten meters deep. Due to the enclosed nature of this spot, it is also very clogged by debris. One wonders whether it would be possible to reshape the landfill there to enable the forces of nature to restore this once beautiful beach.

Curt Manning

THE CREEKS

Some of the anecdotes and data that follow may be old hat to people who grew up in Berkeley and Albany in the 1920s, but for others of us, people who grew up later or elsewhere, the glimpses we get of the bits and pieces of open creek that remain, such as Blackberry Creek in John Hinkel Park, Codornices Creek in Live Oak Park, or the footbridge over a creek to the front door of someone's house, are great finds.

In The Ohlone Way, Malcolm Margolin writes of the Bay Area creek deltas and wildlife as they were in the 1700s upon the arrival of the Spaniards:

Nowadays, especially during the summer months, we consider most of the Bay Area to be a semi-arid country. But from diaries of early explorers the picture we get is of a moist, even swampy land. In the days of the Ohlone Indians, the water table was much closer to the surface, and indeed the first settlers who dug wells here regularly struck clear, fresh water within a few feet.

Along the creek canyons leading into the hills grew buckeye, laurel, wild plum and manzanita trees, forming a habitat for orioles, linnets, wrens, wild canaries and warblers.

In "The Story of Albany Hill," Neil Havlik writes that

...the coming of the Spaniards was marked with few changes (to the creeks and wetlands). Cattle, horses and sheep were grazed on the fertile grasslands, and their main effect was the partial replacement of the native perennial grasses by annual grasses and weeds from the Old World via Mexico. It was with the coming of the Americans that large-scale changes in the landscape began.

But in the early 1900s many of the Berkeley-Albany creeks were still places of beauty, play and investigation. Gerald Browne and Robert Hansen tell tales of minnows, water cress, water snakes, blackberries, owls, linnets, and hundreds of robins in creek willows.

Albany boys engaged in a business enterprise in the creeks. Besides running paper routes and raising guinea pigs for the University laboratory, boys would walk Cerrito and Codornices Creeks setting wire cages to trap "red-heads," the male linnets, which besides being colorful, sang like canaries. The linnets fed on seeds along the creeks. They were sold as songbirds, but this was later halted by the law.

Browne also remembers a place called the Willows near the junction of Middle Creek and Cerrito Creek at the foot of Albany Hill where much, much earlier an Indian camp had been. In any event, by about 1910 this creek junction was a stop-off home for hobos. Browne says that the hobos, their belongings in blankets roped over the shoulder, traveled on Southern Pacific cars, and had their own code. Some might have worked as migratory fruit pickers, others were just knights of the road.

Today most of the Berkeley-Albany creeks are in culverts under streets or under private homes.

Cerrito Creek forms the boundary between Alameda and Contra Costa counties. Until the 1940s, Blackberry Creek ran open through the Thousand Oaks Elementary School yard. Marin Creek runs just about exactly under Marin Avenue between Colusa and San Pablo Avenues. At one time it was dammed near today's Ordway Street to form a watering hole for cows (and a swimming hole for kids on Curtis Street).

Jose Domingo Peralta used to hunt quail along one of the creeks, and so he named it Codornices (which is Spanish for Quail) Creek in 1818.

Strawberry Creek, besides running through the University of California, runs in a culvert under Civic Center Park, the Berkeley City Hall and Spenger's Restaurant.

Interest in the preservation or revitalization of those portions of the creeks that still run free and open is growing. Berkeley has an ordinance which states that the alteration of any area that receives rain runoff requires a permit from the city engineer, and that removal of unauthorized alterations can be required at the property owner's expense.

People building or buying a home over a culverted creek should be aware that the culvert may collapse should the house settle. The storm drain system is integrated with the creeks. Thus, a street catch

basin may drop directly or indirectly into a creek. People parking their cars over storm drains, or dumping oil, chemicals, or dog droppings into the storm drains are, in effect, polluting the creeks. Pollution also occurs when City or private sanitary sewer pipes leak and leach into the creeks.

Barbara Luce-Richey