

# A WALK IN THE UPPER CODORNICES WATERSHED

By Susan Schwartz, President, Friends of Five Creeks (adapted from a June 2006 evening walk)

## Costanoans and rancheros

Native Americans have inhabited the Bay area since before the Bay itself formed -- about 10,000 years ago, as sea levels rose at the end of the most recent Ice Age. Costanoan, or Ohlone, peoples occupied the Berkeley area when Europeans arrived. The Native American groups probably had various seasonal sites for hunting, gathering, and ceremonies, perhaps with the longest stays and most permanent dwellings near the Bay shore. The mounds of shell and other debris that accumulated at these sites have mostly been blasted away, bulldozed, or paved over, but other artifacts remain – most visibly holes worn in rock by women grinding seeds, at places like Berkeley's Mortar Rock and the foot of Albany Hill, and pictographs, designs carved in rock, like those at Canyon Trails Park in El Cerrito.

Under the Spanish and later the Mexicans, Berkeley was part of 48,000 acre Rancho San Antonio, which stretched from San Leandro Creek to Cerrito Creek (today's Alameda/Contra Costa County line). This vast domain was granted to Luis Maria Peralta. Peralta arrived in the Bay Area at age 17 as a soldier with the De Anza expedition, and rose to be military governor at San Jose. Peralta divided Rancho San Antonio among his sons, with Domingo Peralta receiving the northernmost portion, including what is now Berkeley. Domingo Peralta built his home at today's Albina Street, next to the creek his family named Codornices, meaning "quail."

From several branches in the hills, the creek flowed year-round down to about today's Fourth Street. There it probably filtered through a wet grassland to a long north-northwest running salt marsh, drained by a tidal slough. This slough originated at the mouth of Schoolhouse Creek, near today's Virginia Street; meandered north between the "mainland" and a small hill that jutted into the Bay, and emptied into the Bay near the northeast corner of this hill. West of the marsh and slough, a spit of low dunes and a sandy crescent of beach curved from about today's Delaware Street to the hill, where the shoreline rose in low bluffs. This hill, later called Fleming Point, was dynamited in 1939 to build Golden Gate Field racetrack. The rubble was pushed north into the Bay to make the racetrack parking lots.

At the time of the US conquest and the Gold Rush, Berkeley's population was listed as 12, probably all ranch employees. Domingo Peralta sold some of his land – notably Fleming Point to John Fleming, a butcher who used the near island to fatten cattle. Peralta donated land for the area's first school, on the banks of Schoolhouse Creek, near today's Virginia Street. But squatters, land speculators, and crooked lawyers led him into a legal morass in which he quickly lost nearly everything else. Domingo Peralta hung on only to his home on Codornices Creek (near today's Albina St.) until his death in 1865.

## A genteel failure

Those who acquired the Peralta land, honestly and not, generally used it for wheat growing or speculation. In the 1860s, Napoleon Bonaparte Byrne bought 1827 acres, from Wildcat Canyon to today's Josephine St., and today's Cedar to Eunice. A wealthy Southerner seeking health, Byrne came first by steamer from Panama. Returning East, he then crossed the plains in a covered wagon in 1859 with his wife, her mother and sister, four children, and two freed slaves, Berkeley's first African American residents. Byrne planned to settle in San Jose, where there was good farmland. But his wife, who loved beauty and nature, persuaded him to stay in Berkeley. The Byrnes built an elaborate Italianate villa on Codornices Creek in 1868, at what is now the Congregation Beth El synagogue at 1301 Oxford. North of the house was a corral, and south an orchard. A drive stretched west to today's Walnut Street. (The house lasted to become the oldest house in Berkeley, but was torn down in the 1980s after two arson fires.) But beautiful North Berkeley offered poor farming. In the 1870s, Byrne moved to a marshy delta island near

Stockton and began selling Berkeley land piece by piece, to pay to levee and drain it. Success eluded him again. His wife died of fever. He returned to Berkeley only to fail in the fuel-oil business, apparently because he wouldn't dun people to pay their bills. The town eventually gave him a secure living by making him postmaster.

### **Berryman brings the commuters**

Byrne's house and most of his land were bought by Henry Berryman, an aggressive developer who founded Berkeley Water Works, damming Codornices Creek at today's Codornices Park to create Berryman Reservoir. He also persuaded the Southern Pacific to extend its steam-train tracks to Berryman Station at Oxford and Rose. (The station is the reason for the curious extra lanes on Shattuck at Long's Drugs). He also gave his name to Berryman and Henry Streets. Berkeley was incorporated in 1878 with a boundary just north of today's Eunice Street, just north of Codornices Creek. This original "north Berkeley" probably grew faster than the rest of Berkeley during the 1880s. The Berryman Station area boasted a hotel, various stores, a coal yard, and a volunteer fire company that used the old well at Safeway. North and east of the station, large, prosperous homes belonged to doctors, business owners, ship captains, and the like. The main meadow of Live Oak Park held a 14 room home belonging to Dr. Michael O'Toole; the present recreation center area was occupied by a large brown shingle house that was bought by R.S. Penniman, owner of a West Berkeley manufacturing business (and later important in persuading the city to buy the land as a park.) A 20-room tower-decorated Victorian on Vine just above Arch was torn down to accommodate the previous Congregation Beth El. The Victorian at 1431 Arch, with redwood framing and handmade nails, is the sole survivor of a group of 1880s "view homes" in similar style. In level pockets behind these Arch Street houses were orchards and fields. Today's Greenwood Terrace was Captain Thomas's orchard and grain fields; the glen bounded by Tamalpais and Shasta was a dairy farm. There also were more modest cottages – those behind 1407 and 1413 Arch date back to as early as 1896. Some belonged to working people; others were summer homes of vacationers from San Francisco, as hinted by the name Summer Street (where houses back onto Codornices).

### **Berkeley's growth spurt**

In 1903, the Key Route railway began offering a 30 minute commute to San Francisco from the Berkeley Pier in 1903. In 1906, the San Francisco Earthquake sent people fleeing to what seemed more stable ground. Those are the major reasons why, between 1900 and 1910, Berkeley's population soared from 13,000 to over 40,000. The new houses near Codornices were still often large, designed by prominent architects and belonging to prominent people, e.g. 2204 Glen (Dempster house, 1908), 1317 Arch (Admiral William Whiting house, 1905), 1320 Arch (Julia Morgan design, 1906), 1324 Arch (Julia Morgan design, 1910), 1325 Arch (Bernard Maybeck design, 1906) 1345 Arch (1909), 1425 Arch (Julia Morgan design, 1910). The extensive streetcar network encouraged development to move uphill, with houses like 1418 Spring (later Scenic, 1909), 1446 Scenic (1908), 1452 Scenic (1908), and 1404 Hawthorne (Julia Morgan design, 1911) (1408 Hawthorne is a later, 1921, Maybeck). Today's La Loma Park was quarried for building materials (hence Quarry Rd.). La Loma Park was the generic name for the neighborhood, and the PG&E substation was built as its clubhouse. When the Solano Tunnel was built for streetcars between 1908 and 1911, the excavated dirt was used to fill the trestle along today's Henry Street and what had been a Codornices Creek swimming hole (now School of the Madeleine). This period of rapid growth also saw the continuation of Oxford Street across Codornices Creek to join what had been Pine Street, the construction of Oxford School, and the opening of the Northbrae addition north of Eunice, then outside city limits. The new stretch of Oxford was curved to mollify the owners of the Byrne mansion – the street cut off most of their front yard and its elegant drive. Neighbors protested, however, when the city proposed extending Berryman east to Spruce to create the street shown on early plat maps. Thus Berryman between Shattuck and Spruce remained a footpath, as it is today.

## **The Hillside Club embraces nature**

Berkeley subdivisions were laid out with curving streets following natural contours as early as the 1870s. This idea was followed in Peralta Park, in what is now the St. Mary's High School area, where in the 1880s Caspar Hopkins followed "English landscape gardening" ideas, with curved streets following contours and emphasis on Codornices Creek. The high point, literally and figuratively, was a hotel on the rise now occupied by the high school. But "design with nature" really caught on after 1901, as locals took up the international Arts and Crafts style, shingle style, City Beautiful movement, and Asian influences. Women could not vote, but they could influence. In 1898 a group of women formed the Hillside Club, advocating simple design, harmony with nature, streets that followed contours, and paths for walking and reaching streetcars efficiently. Other influential voices included Joseph Worcester, architect who pursued the local shingle style and "building with nature" (he may have influenced design of his niece's house at 1307 Bay View Place), landscape painter William Keith (for whom Keith Street is named), Charles Keeler, John Galen Howard (who designed the houses at 1459 and 1486 Greenwood and 1401 Le Roy), Ernest Coxhead (English architect who designed the 1915 school building that is now the Berkeley-Richmond Jewish Community Center), and of course Bernard Maybeck, who designed the simple wooden houses at 1200, 1208, and 1210 Shattuck and 1476 Greenwood. The style they created is called the First Bay Area Tradition. The "Swiss Chalet" apartment building at 1354-64 Scenic was built in 1907 by architect Paul Needham, a somewhat controversial figure: The Hillside Club considered asking Needham and his wife to resign because the architect set up portable houses in the rather posh Hillside District as a way to let poor people "live in choice localities." The apartment generated rumblings, too, but its arts-and-crafts style mollified critics.

Much of what the Hillside Club group had pushed for was destroyed in 1923, when fire roared out of Wildcat Canyon and down "Nut Hill," just north of the University. Some 4000 people in Northeast Berkeley were displaced. Among the homes destroyed was Maybeck's on Buena Vista. A stucco house he designed across the street, at 2704, survived. After 1923 stucco was more popular than flammable brown shingle in Berkeley. The Hillside Club, however, did not give up. They raised money to rebuild Rose Walk, and rebuilt their headquarters, in stucco, at the south end of Arch Street. (The cottages along the walk, now owned by the University of California, were designed by Henry Gutterson after the fire. Gutterson also designed 1311 Bay View Place.)

## **"Nature Parks"**

Berkeley was slow to create parks. Although commissions warned that lack of recreation was leading to delinquency, voters refused to approve funds. San Pablo Park, designed by developers of the neighborhood of modest homes, became the city's first park in 1907, and a few playgrounds followed. But the city's first "nature park," planned to preserve greenery and open space, was Live Oak Park, purchased in 1914 from the O'Toole and Penniman families. The lush creek canyon made a pleasant contrast to the bare, treeless hills -- and anyone could easily reach the area with 6 cent carfare. One of the first improvements was the present Walnut Street Bridge, designed in 1915. In 1916 the North Branch of the Berkeley Public Library moved to the old Penniman house, which became the park clubhouse. (It burned in 1951; the huge wisteria west of the present Recreation Center is a remnant.) Live Oak Park's large stone fireplace beside the creek was completed in 1917. The first such gathering place in the city, it was a vital part of community life in those days before radio, television, or widespread individual ownership of automobiles. Other parks followed: Codornices Park was leased from the water company as a playground in 1915. John Hinkel gave Hinkel Park and its clubhouse to the city in 1919. The city built large stone fireplaces in both parks, testifying to the popularity of such gathering places. Grotto, Mortar, and Indian Rock Parks, set aside by Northbrae's developers in 1907, became city parks in 1920, when Berkeley annexed the area. But Live Oak, with easy access, remained Berkeley's most heavily used park. The large fireplace hosted more than 10,000 people and 300 gatherings a year.