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Amelia Pixley - Corte Madera's Pioneer Woman Benefactress



THIS BUST of Amelia Van Reyneboom Pixley is the property of the De Young Museum, Golden Gate Park, San Francisco, but is on long-term loan to the Presidio Museum. The inscription reads "Amelia Van Reyneboom Pixley, 1830-1898. Arrival in Corte Madera 1848."

Photo courtesy of De Young Museum

By CATHARINE ROBSON
Of the homestead that lay abutted Corte Madera's present boundary with Larkspur, it was said in an 1861 Marin Journal, "It is the country home of Frank Morrison Pixley, editor, publisher, attorney."

What of his wife, Amelia Van Reyneboom Pixley? It was her home as well, from the moment of arrival in California, her patrimony for whatever her father had of rights in it, and hers legally by gift of her husband. Provisions for its care occupied her days, and when she was widowed, her last hours made provision for the little town, Corte Madera, sure to grow there.

HER FATHER, Capt. John LaTorre Van Reyneboom, came when his bark, the Linda, out of Boston harbor, was beached nearby. With him were Margaret, his wife, and Amelia. Sailors abruptly abandoning ship for the gold country in that year of 1848, obliged the captain to seek a new life on Marin's shores.

The land the family found had not been claimed. It lay between the holdings of John Reed — a Mexican grant named Corte de Madera del Presidio — and that of Juan B. R.

made their home on land near the Presidio that had been taken up by Frank's father, William Pixley (a Connecticut farmer, retired). The section was soon known as Cow Hollow.

MUCH HAS BEEN written of the tough-skinned rise of Frank Pixley, but this is Amelia's story. Captain John and neighbors soon prepared to legalize their preemptive claim to the Marin "public lands." In April of 1861 he and Margaret filed on 160 acres.

Martin had quickly been given separate status from Sonoma County, and divided itself into townships for ease of administration. Corte Madera was put into Sausalito Township. Thus the school when built was known as Sausalito School, and remained so until our own district formed.

Captain John, educated and a natural for small responsibilities, was often chosen for civic and public duties such as collecting taxes. And Amelia never gave up this same sense of duty to bring order and progress to the new land.

THEY PLANTED. A reservoir was built, later enlarged to hold 85,000 gallons of water. What produce they could not use was shipped by way of Ross Landing to market in San Francisco. But the ensuing years were not to be peaceful ones.

Since this is Amelia's story, there is no room to tell of the Van Reyneboom neighbors, who like the captain had drilled wells, built homes, and begun to ranch in the bowl over which the present Corte Madera and parts of Larkspur are spread. These — including Murti, Michael Dowd, James Cummins, Peter Gardner, Rheon, Wormouth, R.S. Brown, to name only a few — had become frightened. The widow of John Reed sought to file in 1861 for a grant upon the very land they occupied.

Though the trial was held in Spanish and did not take place until 1865, his testimony was strong and sure. The surveyors, he maintained, had set boundaries which placed the northern boundary at the mouth of our Canyon, and thence by its creek to the edge of the Bay.

The legal battles went on for many years, but in the years 1871 to 1874, the ranchers established titles by paying in gold, or with the swagging of some of their acreage. Reed heirs or the successors of the lawyer firms who financed these legal battles, gained back much of the land.

The seafaring Van Reynebooms were assured of their entire 160 acres when, early in 1871, their son-in-law, Frank M. Pixley, bought the title for \$2,900 in gold. In a month or so he then gave it to Amelia. Now Amelia owned all the original Van Reyneboom land, plus some 29 additional acres which carried her corners to the very top of Christmas Tree Hill.

The next year, her mother Margaret passed away at the farm. She is memorialized by a bronze plaque in the Church of St. Mary of the Virgin in San Francisco's Cow Hollow. There too is the name of John, whose death came in 1878 at the age of 61.

With the increasing burdens of life at the home that adjoined this church, the so-called "great house" of the little editor Frank Pixley at Union and Steiner streets, Amelia never failed in her devotion to Owls Wood, the name by which their Corte Madera place came to be known.

The couple remained childless. To maintain a position in the burgeoning social life of the city she sponsored a young woman named Fanny as her ward. But the relationship turned out tragically for both. The Argonaut, Frank's weekly paper, gave great scope to his fiery personality, nature, once expended in politics, and this story can be read in many places.

Amelia carried the responsibilities of her farm.

Twice the Pixleys gave the public permission to cross the land. In 1873 the North Pacific Coast tracks crossed the property. The Marin County Road from Sausalito to San Rafael, always there, now needed to be made legal. The meadows were cut off from the house and vineyards.

A private rustic hideaway was preserved only by a group of redwood trees, and here the little editor took up his writing on sunny days.

The road brought mud, wagon-hab deep, and the fences were often breached. Penitents, being hauled through the farm on flatcars for cheap railroad excursions, pelted her stock with rocks and bottles. Amelia struggled, sometimes almost consenting to sell, but always pulling back. Growen nieces and nephews agreed she was "imperious." Her pastor called her "shrewish." And indeed the farmers who managed the place must have had in her, a hard taskmaster. But she could also be generous, and certainly she was industrious.

From a description written in 1891, Owls Wood had not been left fallow.

"For the accommodation of the farmhouse there is a stone reservoir — the water distributable in pipes already laid through the grounds — vineyards and nut-bearing and olive-bearing trees. Upon the farm are an old-fashioned broad-porch farmhouse embowered in groves and surrounded with vines and fruit-bearing trees in full bearing, a spacious enclosure for cows, pigs and chickens. Vineyards, orchards, shade and fruit trees embracing about 25 acres are located upon the extreme border of the place at the mouth of one of its most attractive glens."

From the pen of Rev. William

Bolton, who guided the first steps of St. Mary the Virgin Parish in San Francisco, one learns much about her later life.

It is in the chapel, still much unchanged since 1891, that both Frank and Amelia rest. The Reverend Bolton wrote: "the great lady of the district came regularly, for her heart was right with God; nor did she patronize for all her wealth, her shrewdness and position in Cow Hollow. She never failed the cleric from first to last."

In August of 1898, Frank died and his ashes put into a crypt under the altar.

Now Amelia's days were filled with the concerns of her many properties. In Corte Madera, the land surrounding the railroad station on all sides, gave her thought of the pressing need to relinquish it into orderly growth. She had, with Frank, already given half of the acre needed to build the school. This was the first Corte Madera-Larkspur School District building.

Only a few months after Frank's

death all was ready. Retaining for Owls Wood about 55 acres, she gave the remainder to her sister-in-law for development.

This lady, Catharine O'Reilly Pixley, a widow also, began then with her sons laying out all of the land to homesteads. Included was the land east of the tracks, almost to the edge of our present park, and meeting McCue Tract land. Its northern boundary is now the line between Larkspur and Corte Madera. In a westerly direction it ran up the hill to a point at the top of Christmas Tree Hill.

Roughly it encompassed 136 acres. Amelia died in 1898. But she had lived to see some small tracts with streets that began the town of Corte Madera's infant growth.

Downtown, the Village Square was known as E. C. Pixley Tract. Lots nearer to the station were offered under the more picturesque title of Colony Park. Merry Colonist Tract and Morningstar Addition.

Growth on the lands held by Amelia's neighbors followed similar sub-

THE ARTICLE on this page is another in a series of stories on Marin County's past written especially for the Marin Magazine in this bicentennial year under the auspices of the heritage committee of the Marin County Bicentennial Commission. The articles will continue to appear through 1976.

division patterns, and the town grew to the size sufficient for incorporation by 1915.

Like brother-birds, the towns along the railroad route to Sausalito and its ferries joined in this gentle increase. Amelia's Owls Wood took its place among them.

Amelia Pixley was "imperious. Her pastor called her shrewish. And indeed the farmers who managed the place must have had in her a hard taskmaster. But she could also be generous."

Cooper — Punta de Quentin on the north. It was labeled "Sobranes" and titled in English "Public Land" on a map as late as 1861.

Having wide choice, Van Reyneboom was drawn to a live spring at the foot of our steep wooded hill, sometimes called Christmas Tree Hill now, and to the flat green meadows about. Here the family built a comfortable farmhouse in the summer of the Pennsylvania from which they came, and soon other buildings followed. Today Ardmore Park and Wishore surround the site.

MARGARET AND Amelia had kept a home for the captain aboard ship, and soon the household was the hub of a stock farm large enough to have a registered cattle brand. In 1850, Van Reyneboom stock was known as "Lazy Five," a registered brand which can be seen today in the first register of cattle brands.

But what of Amelia? Life for a cultured young Philadelphia girl was tedious in this remote spot. The answer for her future lay in the lively social life surrounding the San Francisco Presidio. A military band, the Stevens Regiment, sent quickly to establish American authority and preeminence in the spot, had brought life to that sleepy outpost.

Amelia found herself welcome to celebrations, rowing parties on the Presidio lakes, and horseback rides over the sandy hills. It was here she was courted by Frank M. Pixley, a young newspaperman. They were married at Owls Wood in 1863 and

northward from Alto hilltop to the Arroyo Holon. Apparently the U.S. Department of Interior turned her down, but more was to come.

The struggles of each individual rancher, who in his own way set about to tidy up his own claim, make for interesting reading in the Marin County records.

JOHN REYNEBOOM, and others, made an even more spectacular rush to the recorder's office. They filed a rash of "Mining Notices." Dated 1863 and 1864, these notices purport to give evidence of "quartz ledges of silver and gold."

Mining companies with pathetic titles (John called his company "the Linda") were owned jointly by every man in the valley who could read and write.

The historian must suspect a ploy. Perhaps it was to put the land out of reach of any who might argue a previous right to ownership.

Amelia, John and the other ranchers must have quailed at the solid evidence supporting the Reed claim to all of the land: evidence given by the San Francisco gentleman, Jose de la Cruz Sanchez. He was a brother of the widow Reed. He came to the stand to testify before the Federal Public Lands Commission that he was present when the first survey of outer boundaries of Corte de Madera del Presidio was measured.

Sanchez said: "In 1881 I did assist De Haro (the judge) in acts respecting the Rancho John Reed received from the government."



The Corte Madera estate known as Owls Wood in 1880. It was the Marin home of Amelia and Frank Pixley.



This old station house stood on land given by the Pixleys. A young couple posed before it in about 1904.



A view of the downtown village of Corte Madera, about 1926. Homesites on Christmas Tree Hill were laid out by Pixleys.



From Christmas Tree Hill, downtown Corte Madera in 1930. Buildings include Parkside Hotel, old station house, Buckley grocery.