

FIRST SETTLERS...

THE FIRST CENSUS TAKEN AFTER CALIFORNIA joined the Union listed only a handful of people living in Corte Madera in 1850. By the time of the 1860 census, there were several dozen settlers of various nationalities living within the area designated as Corte Madera Township.

However, they were outnumbered many times over by the 504 prisoners and nearly 100 guards or other prison staff residing at San Quentin Prison, who were included in the township of Corte Madera. The 1860 census even lists the crime committed by each prisoner, with “highway robbery” and “assault” appearing repeatedly.

By the time another ten years had passed, Corte Madera had gained more new residents with colorful histories, but these men were prosperous property owners rather than prisoners in the state penitentiary.

James McCue

Dr. James McCue was a self-made man who came to California from Ohio as a youth, shortly before the gold rush. He became a stagecoach driver, a horse doctor, a circus man, and a Klondike prospector, among other things. He also published a newspaper and owned a wholesale liquor business, in addition to peddling his specially concocted “Chinese liniment” that was said to cure both man and beast.



Illustration of McCue's trained circus horse.

James McCue was drawn to Corte Madera in 1871 and bought what he described as “a couple hundred acres for a country home,” including the 167 acres of dairy lands that had been farmed by Peter Dolan between Alto Hill and the bay. Dolan had drowned four years earlier in Corte Madera Creek, and his widow may have lost the property to speculators, who perhaps then sold it to McCue.

McCue's country estate in Corte Madera boasted a seven-foot “bathing place,” a salt-water slough, bountiful orchards, and pastures for grazing cattle. It also featured a half-mile race track for exercising the horses in his “Westman's Equestricurriculum and Circus,” which in 1884 featured three trick horses, along with athletes and contortionists.

In a self-serving philosophical tome he published, called "Plain Talk," McCue touted Corte Madera as "the health and pleasure resort of the earth."

Beginning in 1876, James S. McCue and Frank M. Pixley subdivided the gently sloping uplands above the marsh, creating dozens of homesites on the McCue/Pixley Tracts. The adjacent McCue Orchard Tract, developed in later years, was named for the many fruit trees he planted there.

McCue always bragged about having laid out the town of Corte Madera, which is true of the streets originally named First, Second, Third, Pixley, Ralston, and Eastman. Those streets are known today as Tamalpais, Manzanita, Oakdale, Willow, Chapman (lower), and Eastman.

McCue's own home was most likely on the rise above the junction of today's Eastman and Oakdale Avenues. His famous racetrack lay on a filled and graded section of marshy land that is now the southern part of Town Park. The ground was so well compacted by the horses' hoofs that it could be used afterwards as a baseball field.

McCue was politically ambitious and aspired to high office, but lost his only race for the State Assembly in 1888.

Despite all his capabilities, James McCue was a notoriously cantankerous man. He shot his neighbor Jerry Adams in the face in 1897 over a card game at the Parisian House in San Rafael, and he succeeded in having William Bradbury sentenced to one year in the penitentiary for per-jury connected to a land deal.

Following his well-publicized misunderstanding with Jerry Adams, McCue obtained a \$1,000 stake from a friend and went to Alaska to recoup some of the fortune he had lost, leaving his Corte Madera property to be looked after by neighbors.

He returned to Corte Madera in 1901, having spent four years in the Klondike, where he did hauling with dogsled teams in Dawson.

In the famous, disastrous collision of the Northwest Pacific Railroad's ferry boats San Rafael and Sausalito on November 30, 1901, McCue lost an ear and suffered other injuries. He fought in court for four years before winning damages of \$4,500.

His great bitterness over the experience intensified his deep, longstanding resentment toward the owners of the railroad and ferries, whom he blamed for various other injustices as well.

'Mad-Hat Doc' McCue's history was peppered with lawsuits he instigated, and he bragged of settling disputes "with guns blazing" whenever the situation required it.

During a particularly bitter dispute with a Corte Madera neighbor that arose in 1901, McCue erected a fence blocking passage on the old Sausalito wagon road in front of his house.

When the neighbor removed the fence in order to access his pastures, McCue hired a series of sixteen armed men to keep the fence from being torn down.

An article that appeared in the San Francisco Chronicle on January 11, 1903, titled "The Feud to the Death in the Hills of Marin," describes in considerable detail the history of the dispute and the steps that McCue took to defend his position, quoted as:

This is the contract I made with each man: I will give you \$50 a month and board to put up the fence and keep it there. You will have to face a shotgun and a revolver. I will furnish you with a Winchester, a shotgun, with buckshot for men and bird shot for women, and a six-shooter.

Yes, I have hired sixteen men in succession to guard my fence across this old road, and each man in succession has either been frightened away or won over by the enemy, and now the last of my guards has tried to kill me instead of my enemies. Understand, I am not hiring men to assassinate, but to kill if that be necessary in protection of my property and my rights.

McCue's death in 1910 at the age of 81 was attributed to a fall from his buggy two weeks earlier, the result of a collision with a milk delivery wagon. His son Ralston and daughter Etta learned after his death that he had virtually disinherited them by leaving all his property to his third wife, Kittie McCue.

As a result, McCue's estate when he died was worth only \$500, consisting of a cemetery plot and monument, clothing and personal effects, a violin, and a stallion.

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