



Frank Morrison Pixley c. 1910

Courtesy of Wikipedia

Frank Morrison Pixley, second owner of the Owl's Wood at Corte Madera, held this 191 acre "farm" in one piece until his death in 1895. Today, Chevy Chase Park, Christmas Tree Hill and the old section of town cover these acres. Yet the boundaries of the farm are still

easy to follow. Easy, that is, if you tramp his woods with love in your heart, and, in your pockets a compass and a tracing of a map from Volume 37 DEEDS in the Marin Recorder's Office. (1) Today Owl's Wood, shortened to Owlswood, is still found on a Chevy Chase hillside street sign.

Owlswood was first filed as a 160 acre homestead on December 4, 1860 (2) by a sea captain out of Philadelphia, Captain John L. Van Reynegorm, Pixley's father-in-law. This application was never confirmed. Mr. Pixley then purchased the land from the heirs of the Mexican grantee of Corte de Madera del Presidio (3) for \$2,000 gold. Later, he added enough more of the woods to carry his boundary to the top of Christmas Tree Hill. This was in 1885. Thus enlarged to 191 acres, Owl's Wood became the country estate, orchard, farm and retreat for this well-known San Franciscan. He held this farm in one piece until his death in 1895.

At the age of 24, Frank Pixley came to California with a wagon train, riding a mule. The wagon train left Independence, Missouri during the month of May, 1848. He went at once "with rocker, frying pan and grub" to prospect the north fork of the Yuba River. (4) After a year of mining, he came to San Francisco to practice law, a profession for which he had been educated at Utica College in New York.

In the troubled year of 1851, the first year of the appearance of the San Francisco Committee of Vigilance, he was elected City Attorney. It was a rough initiation. Most local leaders, Sam Brannan, William T. Coleman and James King of William, to name only three, were out to clean up the city regardless of elected officials. As an elected official, the young lawyer had to oppose vigorous move by the Vigilantes who classed City Hall among their enemies. A note appearing in all the San Francisco papers July 15, 1851 answers one such charge against his good name. (5) He was toughened, and carried this scrappy attitude into the courtroom, in to politics, and later in to the columns of the S. F. Argonaut.

He prospered in his law office. In 1853 he married Amelia Van Reynegom of Owl's Wood. She and her mother had been aboard the cargo ship "Linda" when, in 1849, the old captain had brought her to the Marin coast for beaching. All sailors had gone over the side to get to the gold mines.

A story in the family says that during the courting, Amelia and Frank overstayed the hour while dancing at the Presidio ball. Amelia's friends had left for home without her. Frank gallantly borrowed a skiff, and himself rowed Amelia to Sausalito where she could stay with friends until the morning.

After their marriage the couple settled on land adjacent to the Presidio that had been granted to William Pixley, a retired New York Farmer, Frank's father. This well-watered hillside had other family farms and came to be known as "Cow Hollow". Their home, as wealth increased, sprawled out, and the farmyard became a garden. When, in his editorial days, Frank derided the 'nobs' whose mansions were on Nob Hill, one realizes how long Cow Hollow remained an unfashionable section of town. St. Mary the Virgin Episcopal (6) Church, at Steiner & Unions streets, is still there, all that remains of the mansion grounds that covered a square block. Pixley Street, running from Buchanan to Steiner, remains as an honor to Pixley.

By 1859 Frank was deep in politics. He had joined the 'new' Republican Party. When his party met that year his name was proposed as candidate for Governor. He choice however, went to Leland Stanford and Frank campaigned earnestly for his rival. Stanford surprised the democratic majority of California by winning handsomely. Later Pixley was elected State Attorney General, serving 1862 and 1863. He represented San Francisco in the Tenth State Assembly. In Chicago in 1880, at the Republican National Convention he seconded the nomination for James G. Blaine as candidate for U. S. President. (11) Although short of stature, Pixley was an ardent speaker. His speeches showed the mastery of many and strong passions. (8) He then held a seat on the first San Francisco Stock Exchange Board, acted as City Attorney in San Francisco from May, 1851 to January, 1852 (7) and as Attorney General in 1862 and 1863. He also acted as Regent of the University of California from 1875 to 1880, as Park Commissioner of San Francisco from 1882 to 1885, as a member of the Yosemite National Park Board from 1890 to 1894 and as a Trustee of the State Mining Bureau in 1889. And early bank, capitalized at a million dollars, shows Frank M. Pixley as manager. He invested in farming land, bringing capital to land he owned in Tulare County which started a town name for him (12) in the 1880's.

A whole new career, began at age 53, endear him to history buffs: this was the San Francisco Argonaut founded March 25, 1877. He published and edited it until his death (August 11, 1895) and the paper continued until 1958. In it, Gertrude Atherton published her first story, (9) and continued to send news from European capitals. Mark Twain contributed tales; John Stoddard, lectures; Daniel O'Connell, verse and story. Ambrose Bierce was "The Prattler", a gossip column written with a sarcasm undiluted even in the paper's first issue. To himself, Pixley reserved a weekly feature "Olla Podrida", which he explains is a Spanish meat & vegetable dish, and "a newspaper is a metaphorical pot where all sorts of things are boiled together. (10)

At Owl's Wood a grove of redwood trees south for the ranch house was his favorite retreat. Here the little editor talked aloud as he composed, and then scribbled down, the wise, the

scathing and the flaming paragraphs which weekly stewed in the pot “Olla Podrida”. All enemies of his beloved state and city got the heat of the editorial fire under this pot. The subscribers loved it, but he made many his enemies. At Owl’s Wood, always sylvan and remote, he stirred the fire under next week’s stew.

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