

REMEMBERING LIFE IN OLD CORTE MADERA

by Harry Richards

1. Early Days

I was born in 1915 at 206 Baltimore Avenue in a house which is no longer standing, but we soon moved into a new house at that address. The first house was further back on the lot, and it was possible to construct the front house while still living in the smaller, and very old, rear house. My earliest recollections include being at war with Germany, and hearing stories of the mistreatment of the Belgians. Some of the local hot-bloods burned the Kaiser in effigy in the town square. All the songs by German composers were cut out of the school song books, and the books stayed that way until they were replaced many years later. There was a great flu epidemic, and people wore white masks when they went out in public.

2. The Town

In the twenties, there were perhaps 300 families, mostly living in modest homes that were within walking distance of the railroad, whose trains stopped at town square and at Chapman Park. East of Pixley Avenue were meadows and hayfields, with some habitation along Meadowsweet Drive, and scattered up Chapman Hill. West of the railroad, there were houses all over Tank Hill, extending all the way up Summit Drive nearly to the water tank, which still stands there. Our back fence on Baltimore was also the Larkspur city line, abutting the Palm Hill tract, which had no houses, and was variously used to run cattle and horses, and to raise hay. There were no sidewalks and the streets were unpaved. During the twenties, an extensive program of laying concrete streets, curbs and sidewalks was started, and most of the sidewalks remain, many broken up by trees. The streets have all been overlaid with blacktop, and some have been widened.

As to utilities, we always had electricity, and it was about as reliable as now. The Marin Municipal Water District had been formed. The water came from Alpine Dam; was unfiltered and was famous for its good taste and limitless supply. There was no gas, however, due to the limited capacity of the gas-producer in San Rafael. In the late twenties, gas became available, and gas mains were laid all over town. Within memory, there was always a sewage collection system. Mains from the three principal drainages converged to an outfall main on Meadowsweet Drive, with the effluent being dumped without treatment into San Clemente Slough.

There was little by way of a "Public Works" department. Road grading was done by Mr. Charles Wohlgamuth, using horse-drawn equipment, and operating out of a large barn on First Street, which is now a hair shop. During the dusty months he sprinkled the unpaved roads with salt water drawn from San Clemente Slough. Mr. Wohlgamuth also collected the garbage with his wagon, and it was dumped without ceremony into the salt marsh where the Paradise Center now exists. As Mr. Wohlgamuth was a family friend, I was sometimes accorded the privilege of riding along on the garbage run. Not everyone was willing to pay for garbage service, and these persons used the nearest gully for their personal disposal area. I am sure there are some fine bottles and other artifacts buried around town.

Law enforcement, in my recollection, was minimal, nor was there much need. The law seemed to be centered in the person of a constable McNamara, but I don't know who paid him. After my father had bought an automobile, he was deputized for several years to try to catch speeders on the Corte Madera grade--the Town's first traffic cop, I guess. There was a Town Council and a Mayor, and also a municipal judge. My father was on the Council for a

few years, and while not usually a smoker, always took a cigar with him on meeting night, "In self-defense," he said.

3. The Seasons

Winter seemed to be more dramatic than it is now. There were great howling wind and rain storms that lasted for days. Every little stream ran bank-full, and there were ponds and puddles everywhere. Some years, the lowlands became one vast lake, with only the county road and the Tiburon railway embankment showing above the water. To a small boy, decked out in rubber boots, slicer and sou'wester, all this water was nothing but fun. Then it would turn cold, with frosty mornings and ice on all the standing water. This ice was never thick enough to walk on, but we always tried.

Springtime found Palm Hill and any other open space carpeted with wild flowers--poppies, lupine, columbine, buttercups and many others. Even Rock Hill, a small eminence next to the Episcopal church, was covered with flowers.

Summer was the best, although there was a lot of fog and wind, as now. Summer vacation was eight or nine weeks, and seemed to last forever. There were many vacant lots around town, and the grass became very high and dry, so the volunteer fire department would spend many summer evenings burning off these lots in a controlled manner. I suspect that their pleasure was only exceeded by that of the small-fry spectators.

Fall was almost like an extension of summer, except that one had to go back to school. You could scuff in the dry leaves, and pick huckleberries on Tank Hill.

4. Home Life

I remember a happy home life. My father came west from Boston about 1908 to set up a west coast office and repair shop for the Submarine Signal company, pioneers in the field of underwater sound (now the Raytheon Company.) He went to the office at 32 Howard Street in The City every day, and had only the one job in his lifetime. My mother came west later, about 1909, on the train with the first child, in arms, for company.

My mother was what we now call a homemaker, and was always there when needed. We four children were well separated, so that sibling disputes were minimal. Household equipment was primitive by present standards. There was no central heat, and before the gas lines came to town, we heated with a kerosene Perfection Heater, with often a roaring fire in the fireplace in addition. Our first kitchen stove was a kerosene wick unit, and later a stove that burned kerosene without wicks, and that was followed by a gas stove, supplied from large pressure tanks on the back porch. Needless to say, the Standard Oil truck was a frequent visitor, to supply tanks of gas, and to fill a 100 gallon kerosene tank in the yard.

Before radio, our only home entertainment was an Edison phonograph, which played cylindrical records, and a fine large Swiss music box, which is still in the family. I remember building a crystal set radio, which you listened to with ear phones, and which had a very limited capability. Our first radio that had a loud-speaker was custom-built, utilized the new vacuum tubes, and was powered with a 6-volt automobile battery, plus two large 45-volt dry cells. This radio could bring in literally hundreds of stations--about everything west of the Mississippi, and the settings were logged so that we could find the station again. My earliest recollections of radio include listening to political talks during the first Hoover campaign. Classical music was not widely broadcast, but you could listen to the New York Philharmonic

on Sunday, and Standard Oil sponsored a broadcast of the San Francisco Symphony on Thursday evenings, the orchestra being conducted by Alfred Hertz.

We had a telephone about as soon as it was available, with a 3-digit number. Some of the earliest subscribers had one-digit numbers. The central office was in a brick building in Larkspur.

Food, I suspect, was plain by present standards, but my mother was a good cook, and it tasted wonderful to a child. Because of her New England background, she always made baked beans and brown bread on Saturday, codfish cakes for Sunday breakfast, and waffles for Sunday supper. Sunday dinner, served exactly at 1:30 p.m. was the big meal of the week; always a roast, potatoes and vegetables, with hand-cranked ice cream for dessert. There were often guests, usually my father's employees or friends from "The City." The men were often put to work after dinner on some ongoing project around the premises. Mixing concrete by hand was a favorite task, to be used on sidewalks.

5. Shopping

There was no supermarket. In the afternoon, my mother would get dressed up and head uptown on foot--she never drove--stopped first at Bill Wyatt's produce store, where purchases were wrapped in newspapers and tied with string. Next stop was either the Buckley & Co. or Grosjean grocery store, and finally the meat market operated by Conrad Schneider and his son Carl. Each of these vendors had free delivery service, so you didn't have to carry your purchases home. Much shopping was done by telephone. No cash changed hands. Everything was charged to a monthly account, which was paid in person at the end of each month. I tried to be along on settlement day, because there were gifts for small children. The butcher always gave me a raw hot dog, which was consumed on the spot.

We could also shop right at house-front from certain vendors. A Chinese produce man came once a week, with an open-sided truck filled with excellent fruit and vegetables. This man originally made his rounds with two large baskets on a pole, but this was before my time. On Friday, the fish man came, announcing his arrival on a tin horn. He had a roadster with the back cut out to accommodate a large wooden box of iced fish. He would open the lid to expose the fish, a cutting board and an array of razor-sharp knives. There was always a huge salmon, the like of which you never see anymore; it was so fresh that it made a raspy sound when cut.

Fresh milk was delivered to your door every day by the Nelson Creamery. You could pour the cream off the top and whip it. Homogenized milk had not been invented. They also brought real butter and eggs when needed. Later on, for economy, we began to use oleomargarine, but this, by law, was white and looked awful on the table. There was a little vial of dye in the oleo package, and by a great amount of mixing you could make the stuff look like butter. Naturally, this wretched task was considered to be child's work.

For serious clothing and household shopping we went to San Francisco on the train and ferry, and a child was always taken along, but only one at a time. The lower end of the shopping scale was Hale's basement, progressing upward to The Emporium, The White House, City of Paris, and O'Connor-Moffat. If you needed housewares, you went to Charles Brown on Market Street. Special food treats were to be had at the Crystal Palace Market, now long gone. After a day in The City, with four lines of street cars thundering along Market Street, the peace seemed to soak back into you when you got off the train at Corte

Madera.

6. The Sounds

If you put your head outside now at seven in the morning, you can hear the roar of the freeway. It was not always that way--Corte Madera was utterly silent, except for certain characteristic sounds: a dog barking in the distance, or a rooster crowing. Cows lowing in the adjacent pastures. Nanny goats bleating from the "goat man's" herd up on the hill. A Model 'T' chugging by slowly. The old iron church bell clanging at St. Patrick's in Larkspur before each mass. The Episcopalians rang their bell only on Sunday. The high-pitched whistle of the old green electric trains, or the melodious chime of the new red trains. Several times a day, the window-rattling passage of a steam train, whistling two longs and two shorts for the grade crossings. The horn of the fish wagon, the jingle and rattle of a team of horses. Sometimes when the wind was right, you could hear the staccato exhaust of the Heisler steam locomotive hauling a train to the top of Mt. Tamalpais. In the fall and winter, there was the booming of the duck hunter's guns on the bay. At redwood and Willow, there was a seasonal pond about fifty feet across. Thousands of frogs emitted a mighty chorus all night long. When you walked by, they would all stop, and then resume song when it was safe. At 3:30 pm each day, there would be a whistle from the Hutchison Quarry at Greenbrae, followed by a series of thunderous blasts as they shot the holes that they had drilled that day.

The fire siren was sounded at eight, twelve, and five, and Larkspur did likewise with their horn. At the school, a great happy sound arose at recess time. In spite of all this, the impression was still, utter quiet.

7. School

there was only one school, the Larkspur-Corte Madera School, in a two-story frame building just east of the redwood grove. The first phase of the present concrete structure was built when I was in the third grade. There was no kindergarten, and you had to be 5 years and 9 months to start school. My progress was steady, so I completed my 16 years of schooling when I was 21. Weather permitting, we would line up outside by grades, raise and salute the flag, and then march into class to the beat of a drum. I doubt that this procedure would fly today. I started to Tamalpais High School in 1928, a great step because you went there on a steam train, called "The Special", which flew a white flag, went to Almonte Wye, and then backed up the Mill Valley branch line to a stop, appropriately called "High School." After a year, the railroad put on a train of their new red electric coaches, five cars at 100 passengers each. The end car was boys only, by some unwritten law; the others were mixed gender.

8. Amusements

There was little by way of planned activities for children. We did a marvelous job of amusing ourselves. There were games of all kinds--marbles, tops, mumbly-peg, kick-the-can, hide-and-seek, and various informal ball games. Taylor Lane was a dead-end street, unpaved, and made a splendid play ground. Everyone had steel-wheeled roller skates, and when they first overlaid the streets with black-top, you could skate to the end of Meadowsweet Drive on velvet-smooth pavement. Factory-made bicycles and scooters were expensive, and we got along very well with home-made coasters and push-mobiles, made from worn-out roller skates.

We did a lot of hiking, up the “the tank,” a 1,000-foot climb, and on Palm Hill, and in Baltimore Canyon. we had family picnics at a live spring in the Canyon, near the end of Madrone Avenue. If we could get transport, we had picnics at “the spring,” a small wooded beach on the bayshore just around the turn from the present Marin Country Day School. This beach and the spring were destroyed when construction was started on the ammunition depot in 1945. Houses now cover the site.

We did a lot of swimming. Middle Slough out in the tidal marsh was remote from sewage outfalls, and was considered clean, and was accessible by the boardwalk under the power line. Mr. Hill had a bath-house on the Larkspur boardwalk, but the water quality there was suspect. sometimes on Saturday we took the train for a visit to the huge San Rafael Baths, near the end of the San Rafael canal. When water was available, we built rafts from the old railroad ties, and explored the sloughs in the marsh.

There was a movie--no color, no sound--every Friday night at the upstairs hall in Larkspur City Hall, put on by Mr. and Mrs. Peterson. Mrs. Peterson played a dramatic accompaniment to the film on the piano, and you could smell the hot film as the projector was right in the room.

When we were old enough, we would walk across the fields and on the railroad tracks to Greenbrae, where we would fish for perch from the wooden drawbridge. When we were older, we would walk through the prison grounds to the Point San Quentin ferry pier. Ten cents worth of freshly-boiled shrimp from Spenger;s would provide bait for fishing, plus some to eat. This was a five-mile walk each way, but sometimes we would get a ride from an infrequent car that passed.

9. Transportation

The electric trains and the ferries provided transport The City, and by transferring at the Ferry Building you could go to the East bay. At rush hours, the trains ran every 30 minutes and you were at the foot of Market Street in one hour. During the day and at night, the headway was one hour. The last boat from The City left at 11:30 pm. We also used the train to get to San Rafael or Fairfax. I have mentioned “The Special” that took us to High School in Mill Valley. The steam passenger train to Eureka came through at 9:30 pm every night in the year, and the return train was at 8:10 am You could set your clock by that train. It didn’t stop at Corte Madera; you had to go to San Francisco or Sausalito to get on the Eureka train.

You could take the busses of the Petaluma Bus Company to get to Santa Rosa and way points--these busses ran on the Redwood Highway, now Corte Madera Avenue. There were no big trucks, as today, but there were many medium-size trucks carrying redwood lumber to San Francisco, tan bark to the tanneries in Redwood City, chicken manure to the Peninsula truck farms, and in the fall, boxes of Zinfandel grapes to the Italians of the Bay Area for wine making. These trucks were under-powered and crept over the Corte Madera Grade at a snail’s pace.

The automobile came to our family in 1923. My father purchased a new Willys-Knight touring car in San Francisco, learned to drive it there, and then brought it home as a surprise. His favorite Sunday drive was up the old Redwood Highway, picnic lunch on the Hopland Grade, over the mountains to Lakeport, and home via Mt. St. Helena and the Napa Valley. At 35 miles per hour, this took all day, especially if there were a flat tire enroute. We later drove the Willys-Knight to Eureka and San Diego--long trips in those

days. Previous to the auto, my father had owned a 1915 Harley-Davidson motor cycle, but this was hardly family transportation.

10. Festivals

May Day was an important event, as it is in Europe now. The occasion was a gathering of the Southern marin school children at the Kent estate, on fields where the College of Marin athletic facility is now sited. Our mothers took us to this week-day affair on the electric train. There were athletic events separately for boys and girls among the several schools (which I hated) followed by a grand picnic on the grass (which I loved). The grand finale was the Maypole dance. The older girls danced around six or eight Maypoles, intertwining their ribbons until the pole was covered, and then unwinding them again. Live music of appropriate tempo was supplied by the Tamalpais High School Band. One year there was a real wedding as part of the ceremonies.

The big event of the year was the 4th of July. There were no public fireworks. My father purchased a large box of Roman candles, sparklers, volcanoes, fountains, pinwheels, snakes, etc., and parceled them out among the children. After dark, these were set off out in the street, with indescribable joy. One year just before the 4th, I happened to set a small grass fire in our yard, which was quickly put out. In addition to corporal punishment, I got no fireworks that year--a terrible blow.

I don't recall Labor Day as being of much importance to the children. There were, of course, big union parades in The City, but these were not to our taste.

Thanksgiving Day was big, and only a short trip a block away to my grandmother's house for the great feast.

Christmas was always celebrated at home--a genuine fir tree, very fresh, with colored lights in the shapes of fruits and flowers. Toys were simple (no batteries) and the joy of opening packages was almost uncontainable.

A week or two before christmas, there were programs for children, with individual red socks of sweetmeats, at the churches, and a school event at Larkspur City Hall. At the latter program, Santa Claus arrived by sliding down a rope from a door high in the rear wall of the hall. It was widely rumored that he was actually one of the volunteer firemen.

New Year's Eve was spent with neighbors, and at midnight the older boys went out in the street and fired shotgun shells into the air, while the rest of us beat on tin pans. The same activity was going on all over town.

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1-10-89