

OLD CORTE MADERA WALKING TOUR #1

(Sample walk led by Harry Richards on October 29, 1988 - 1.5 hours, 1.5 miles)

Walk starts at Redwood Avenue bus stop in Old Corte Madera Square:

1. Episcopal church, built in 1901, remodeled several times. Monterey pine out front, now removed, was claimed to be the first lighted outdoor Christmas tree.
2. The landscaped area just left of the Attic Archives store was site of the first firehouse.
3. Attic Archives building was owned by Mahood Brothers, who operated the post office, the telephone exchange, and a sweet shop there.
4. Corte Madera Cafe building was built about 1935 for Parkside Produce Market. Prior to that, the site was open except for the William Wyatt produce store, a very small frame building. Nobody else in town sold produce at that time.
5. The building now occupied by Stellar Spa was originally a livery stable owned by John Allen, where you could rent a horse and buggy, like you rent a Hertz car today. For many years afterward it was occupied by Buckley & Co., dealing in groceries, general merchandise, coal, and wood.
6. The old railroad station and the freight shed were located on what is now the eastern side of the Montecito Drive (formerly Railroad Avenue) parking strip in Old Corte Madera Square.
7. The Tamalpais Paint & Color building was built in the late 1960s to replace an old structure that burned down at that time. The old building had a western-style facade and was occupied by the Chris Spiegel market. Later it was taken over by Grosjean & Co., a small Marin grocery chain, and by Conrad Schneider, butcher. All of the stores mentioned here would take your phone order, then deliver it at no cost.
8. First Street used to cross the railroad tracks, dipping down onto the extension of First Street that is now called Tamalpais Drive. The crossing was very dangerous--steep, no signal, no visibility, and the flyer trains went through at 60 miles per hour. The railroad successfully pressured for closure of the crossing, since there was another only a block away.
9. The part of Tamalpais Drive that curves up around Old Corte Madera Square in front of the shops mentioned above was called Park Street, in tribute to the park landscaped by the Corte Madera Women's Club alongside the railroad tracks in the early days.
10. The tiny Alterations building was at one time Pingree Realty, owned and operated by Bessie Voorhies Pingree, and then by her daughter Auda Pingree Bordanaro, and granddaughter Jan Bordanaro Valk.

11. Amazing Hair occupied the two-story stucco building put up by Mrs. Pingree as Corte Madera's first high-rise office building.
12. To the right, the small frame building was originally a large barn that stabled the horses and wagons of Mr. Wohlgamuth, who graded and sprinkled the unpaved streets, and also collected the trash.
13. The Parkside Hotel has always been called that, but within memory has not actually been a hotel. Owned by Jerry Adams in 1902, it contained the post office. About 1910, the building was transferred to Louis Rea. Prior to Prohibition, there was a bar and pool hall on the ground floor. The upstairs was divided into several apartments. Mr. Rea also owned Rea's Theater, on the corner lot at First Street and Corte Madera Avenue.
14. Continuing south along the old railroad grade, at 317 Montecito was a gravel bunker operated by Mr. Cecil Leonard until the 1930s. The bunker was filled from the road above, and then fed into his truck below. He was the local supplier of sand, gravel, and cement. Next door was the building where he sold ice and coal, delivered to the homes.
15. Look for remnants of the large eucalyptus trees that once grew all along the railroad.
16. On the right are some of the small cottages that still abound throughout the town, many without alterations.
17. Leave the railroad grade and go up a small path, crossing Montecito and climbing up a narrow lane which is Harmon Avenue.
18. At Grove Street, stop and look around. The large white house uphill, with several pointed roofs, is the Bradbury mansion, one of the first houses in this area. The house at 121 Grove is very old, too. Go left on Grove, to the end.
19. The large French-style house, uphill, with mansard roof, is relatively new--about 70-75 years, but is one of the town's finer homes. It was occupied by the Burns family for many years, but has been owned by the Weber family for the past forty years or so, and was recently renovated by them in exactly the same form.
20. Uphill from the end of Montecito, almost hidden in the trees, is the brown Craftsman-style house built by the Malmgren family in 1909 on an acre of land, one of the first houses in this area.
21. Go back a short distance and look for Colony Path on the right, then take it back down to Montecito. Go north a little on Montecito to #423. This is the Rea house, built by Charles Wilson prior to 1900, and occupied by the Rea family from 1907 to the late 1980s.

22. Return south on Montecito to the graveled turnaround. This is the site of Chapman Station, which was intended to serve the new subdivision of Chapman Park, laid out about 1906.
23. The two small green buildings just south are pumping stations of the water district. The pumps take suction from the original Southern Marin pipeline and deliver it over the hill, through a small tunnel that lies above the abandoned railroad tunnel. The older pumphouse was built about 1907 when Marin Municipal Water District was formed and took over all the small local systems.
24. Go left down the steps to Willow Avenue. There used to be a traffic circle here, where buggies could deliver their passengers to the train. Then there were no more buggies, and later there were no trains. The developer of Chapman Park, Edgar C. Chapman, had a small sales building here, now long gone.
25. Go to Chapman Drive, and to the right. Note #352 and #356, built in the style of a Swiss chalet.
26. At the hair-pin turn, go right on Stetson. Note the very large Monterey cypress on the right. This area was devoid of trees, and thousands of saplings of various kinds were planted by the developer's agent, Frank Tainter.
27. #42 Stetson is typical of early homes in this area, probably built around 1915. It was likely built mostly of redwood, hence very durable.
28. #103 Stetson was occupied by the Francis Foote family for many years. Note the blue-rock foundation, and that the house exhibits little change from the original exterior.
29. Proceed around the turn and up to the level portion of the road. For many years, it was unpaved, just two muddy ruts in winter. Look for views of the Corte Madera ridge to the left. Much of the ridge is public open space. The light areas are dead Madrone trees, largely wiped out in this area by a blight in the 1970s. Look for the Germanic-looking house surrounded by woods. This is the Chapman "castle." Two large new homes loom above it.
30. Note stone pillars on the right. This was to be the entrance to a large estate, but no manor house was ever built, and the property was subdivided.
31. Go down the concrete steps to the left. Note the designs in the step surfaces, and look for the date 1906. The Tainter Steps were part of the tract development, a shortcut to get to the trains.
32. The old house on the left, 431 Chapman, has its access from the stairway. Note the uncommon clapboard siding, and the plumbing pipes placed outside the walls, a common practice when this house was built.

33. Where the lower steps meet Chapman Drive again, note the large contemporary house on the left. This is one of the old houses that has been completely rebuilt so the original no longer shows.
34. Go back to the “circle” (really more of a triangle) and turn right on Willow. #308 was the Mezzetta house. They were one of the hard-working Italian families of this area. Their family-owned business now has its products in every grocery store in the area, although the business is now in Sonoma.
35. At the corner of Oakdale, look right to the lowest part of the street. There were large mushroom-growing sheds at this location before any houses were built.
36. Continuing on Willow, note several of the early cottages, most nearly in their original appearance, except that the front porch was often closed in to gain living space. #239 has some Victorian embellishments, and has been extensively remodeled.
37. Cross the street to Rocklyn Court and walk around the loop. This was an open field with an out-cropping of chert in the middle, covered with trees. The Platts built a house right on the outcrop. Mr. Platt was at one time mayor of Corte Madera. Note on the outer side of the circle, six houses built by Gerald Kott. Similar “Kott” houses are all over southern Marin.
38. Arriving at Tamalpais Drive, go left. The office building on the left stands on filled ground. There was a great hollow, filled with blackberries, with a boardwalk where the sidewalk is now.
39. Across the street, the small frame building that houses a hair salon is the remnant of Mr. Wohlgamuth’s barn, which we mentioned at the beginning of the walk.

The walk ends back at the bus shelter that stands on the former railroad track.

(This walking tour was slightly updated in May 2001.)

CORTE MADERA HERITAGE & HISTORY GROUP WALKING TOUR #2

(Sample walk led by Harry Richards on November 20, 1988 - 1.5 hours, 1 mile)

Walk starts at Redwood Avenue bus stop shelter in Old Corte Madera Square. At attempt is made to describe things as they were about 1920.

Proceed south on the sidewalk that lies where the railroad tracks once ran. For people who have not been on Walking Tour #1, the buildings on the east side of Old Corte Madera Square are described in items 1 through 13 of that trip. At the end of the sidewalk, cross the railroad right-of-way and go down the ramp to Tamalpais Drive.

1. The small frame building (hair salon) was reconstructed from the Wohlgamuth barn. Mr. Wohlgamuth did all the street maintenance, sprinkling, etc., using horse-drawn equipment, and also collected the garbage, which was dumped at the present location of Paradise Shopping Center.
2. In this block, the south side of the street had a boardwalk crossing over a huge blackberry patch growing in a hollow.
3. The southeast corner of Tamalpais and Willow has one of a few Victorian houses in Corte Madera. The Klein family lived there.
4. The next house, #315 Tamalpais, was constructed for the Arthur Pingree family by Mrs. Pingree's father, George Voorhies, about 1900.
5. Adjacent to Tamalpais Drive, the land now occupied by the Town Hall parking lot formerly contained a modest single-story frame house that was purchased by the Town and used for Town offices prior to 1966. Legend has it that this was a prefabricated house that had been shipped "around the Horn." This could be true, since it was probably the same structure that was the only stage stop between Sausalito and San Rafael. It was occupied by William Eastman when he was the first postmaster in 1871. The old wagon road ran past this location after crossing Alto Ridge at 'hidden valley' as it made its way toward San Rafael on a course that later became the county highway through old Larkspur.
6. The large James Stevens home stood at the corner of Tamalpais and Pixley, where the public safety building now stands. It was later known as the Mahood house, after Maude Stevens married Dell Mahood and the family lived there until the structure was razed for construction of the Town's public safety building in 1966.
7. Turn left on Pixley Avenue. This corner was all pastureland to the east and north, used by Meadowsweet Farm for cattle grazing. It was salt marsh until the whole area was diked off by the Donahue railroad in the late 1800s. That railroad bed is now the bike path east of The Village.
8. The apartment complex at #19 Pixley is on the site of the Mary Eastman and Cunningham houses. Pixley ended just beyond this point.
9. The apartment buildings at Pixley and Redwood are on filled ground. This was a low-lying meadow, crossed by a cast-iron sewer pipe on a wooden trestle--a favorite walkway for small boys.
10. The children's playground at Town Park is about where a salt-water slough ended, navigable all the way to the bay. Boats were kept here. Remnants of this slough can be seen north of The Village, and in the Heerdt Marsh. A single eucalyptus tree used to grow here.

11. Go left on Redwood Avenue, an area that was all pasture, with the street ending at the pasture fence.
13. #70 Redwood was the Granucci cottage. #71 was the Craig house, the last house on Redwood. #75 was Moore's Hall. The upstairs was a hall used by the Christian Science church and by other organizations, as there was no other meeting hall until the assembly hall was built at the Episcopal Church.
14. #84 Redwood, on the northeast corner at Willow, was the home of Lizzie Richards, grandmother of Harry Richards. Note overhang beyond property line. House had sheet zinc siding, now shingled over, and a coal furnace in the basement, unusual here. On very rainy years, the adjacent creek overflowed into the basement.
15. Continue across Willow and up Redwood. #111 Redwood is another modest Victorian. Sponsellers lived here for many years, and we understand that he raised the house so as to create a basement.
16. Go across, and back down Redwood. There are three old houses here, each in distinctively different style. Mr. Kimball lived in one, and had a large vegetable garden adjacent.
17. The apartment house on the corner of Willow is over a creek that became a frog pond in the winter, and which often froze over.
18. Continue left on Willow. #18 is a large turn-of-the-century house that has always had the same external appearance. Art Giddings lived here, and later for many years it was the home of Frear Burke.
19. At the triangle, we enter what was sort of a "Little Italy." #12 Willow was the home of Baglietto Sr., and across the street was Baglietto Jr. and Gambarini. Four families pooled their efforts in buying a truckload of red grapes each fall, and made the legal amount of wine.
20. #4 Willow was the James house, later the Tambussa home. Mr. Tambussa took the lead in the wine-making, and the crushing and cellaring were done in his basement. The neighborhood had a distinctive aroma, needless to say, during this season.
21. Go right, uphill on Baltimore. Tambussa's garage was a part-time cooperage. Mr. Tambussa reconditioned oak wine barrels for much of the Marin Italian colony.
22. #211 Baltimore was the Faure house. Augustine Faure Hall, a beloved teacher, lived here as a child and young adult.
23. #215 was the Virzi house, one of the oldest in the neighborhood. Mr. Virzi raised grapes, goats, vegetables, and a number of children, and was sometimes referred to as the

“goat-man.” The Virzi family made their own wine, had a small grocery store on the lower level, and seemed to be quite self-sufficient.

24. #219 was the first house in the area, built at the corner of the Pixleys’ old Owl’s Wood homestead, at the edge of the town limits. Baltimore Avenue ended here. The house had a Victorian effect, but the shingles and an expanded second story have been added. This house is clearly seen in many vintage photographs of the town.

25. #230 was the Benjamin Scouler house. He was Corte Madera’s first mayor. This distinctive house once had a large front yard and extensive garden, but the lot was split in recent decades and a blocky modern home now occupies the frontage. Turn around and go back down Baltimore.

26. #214 is a carefully designed new home that appears to be a handsome early 1900s house. Formerly on the site was a small, single-story cottage that had once been a two-story house on the back of the lot, but was cut in two by the owner Mr. Francis, who moved it forward, mostly by himself.

27. #208 Baltimore has a tall palm tree that was part of the front garden of the Weber house, which burned around 1912. The lot was purchased by Percy Richards, who built the two garages, now converted to dwellings. The adjacent house, #206, was built by Percy Richards in 1915, and was the boyhood home of Harry Richards. The design was selected from a catalog, “Aladdin Homes,” and the contractor was A. C. Wheeler.

28. #204 was the second house on this site, built about 1923 for Lizzie Richards, grandmother of Harry Richards. Note the cypress tree growing around the brick wall, which was built about 1920.

29. Turn right on Taylor Lane. #8 Taylor Lane was owned by Lizzie Richards, but was vacant for many years. It was used for storage, and the Thimble Club met downstairs on Thursdays. There was a windmill and elevated tank in the back yard. The cedar tree was transplanted from the Sierra. This whole area was originally part of the Van Reynegon Ranch.

30. #2 Taylor lane was the home of William Taylor, father of Lula Taylor Horne and grandfather of Ada May Horne, who also lived here. The house used to look the same as #8, but has been subjected to the ultimate remodeling job. Houses beyond this point are in Larkspur.

31. Return to Baltimore Avenue and go right. #123 Baltimore was the Harriman house, which has the original appearance, except that it has been raised to create a whole new ground-floor level.

32. #119 Baltimore was the turn-of-the-century Casebolt house, lovingly maintained.

33. #106 was the Tucker house, which has virtually the original exterior.

34. Go to the end of Baltimore and turn left on Palm. Several small cottages are here, on extremely narrow lots. The railroad was just behind them.

35. #128 Palm was the Keppel house.

36. #101 Palm was the Gardiner house (Uncle Henry.) It was partially burned some years ago and has been restored. These old houses have a lot of redwood in them, which doesn't burn very well.

37. #111 Palm was the Charles Russel house, beautifully maintained. Mr. Russel was a locomotive engineer on the Eureka run.

38. #118 was the Grant house, another small cottage like many that were on this block. The Grants emigrated from Canada and spoke with an accent. He operated a shoe-repair business in the front room.

39. #1 Palm, at the corner of Redwood and Palm, is an apartment building that stands where William Wyatt, the produce man, had his home. There was a well with a one-cylinder gas engine pump, for irrigation, and a tennis court behind. (Question asked: Was this the tennis court promised by the Pixley family for use by the neighborhood?)

40. Reaching Redwood Avenue again, the small business building was the Nelson Creamery, which delivered milk and cream to your door. Anton Nelson settled here about 1908, and built the house in the rear, occupied until at least about 1990 by family members.

40. #142 Redwood is the Yoga Center, in a building constructed by Percy Richards in 1925 as the Community Garage, for the purpose of automobile storage, since nobody had garages. Due to popular demand, it soon expanded to a full-fledged repair shop and service station, with several employees and open until 10:00 p.m. Try to find that now! There were also six individual steel rental garages, all moved later to other locations, some still in use.

41. Across the street, where the parking lot next to the church is now, was Rock Hill, an outcropping of big boulders with grass and wild flowers--much loved by the children.

42. Holy Innocents Episcopal Church, built in 1901. The two-story hall in the rear was originally one-story and was called the Assembly hall--a welcome addition to the town's few meeting places. The church's large outdoor Christmas tree was famous in the area.

We have now arrived back at the starting point.

(Prepared by Harry Richards in November 1988 and updated slightly in May 2001.)