

## EARLY SETTLERS

### **First Homesteader - Capt. John L. Van Reynegom (1848)**

**A sea captain and his family build a home and a ranch on wooded foothills overlooking the bay at Corte Madera in 1848**

Although other homesteaders lost their lands, one settler's heirs eventually obtained clear title to their family homestead by settling with the speculators for \$2,000 in gold coin.

That homesteader was John L. Van Reynegom,\* a trader and sea captain from Boston, who brought his sailing bark, the "Linda", around Cape Horn in 1848. Once inside San Francisco Bay, his crew jumped ship and headed for the gold country.

With his wife, Margaret, and their daughter, Amelia, Van Reynegom beached the "Linda" on the Tiburon Peninsula, near the place now called Paradise Cay.

Seeking a more sheltered spot, the three of them walked westward to the wooded hillsides, where they discovered a live spring at the foot of a ridge. There the captain built a simple dwelling and established a small farm.

In 1861 he filed a claim for 160 acres between Mount Tamalpais and the bay, reaching from what is now Chapman Meadows to Baltimore Canyon. It is shown on an old map of the area as "Van Reynagan Ranch."

John Van Reynegom planted vineyards and orchards, and had a stock farm large enough to have his own registered cattle brand, the Lazy 5. He built a reservoir that was subsequently expanded to hold 85,000 gallons of water drawn from the spring on his land.

Later, the captain owned and operated the steamship "Ida", carrying milled lumber, freight, and a few passengers between Corte Madera Creek and San Francisco three times a week in 1860.

But earlier, in the years immediately after the Van Reynegoms' arrival, American settlers were still relatively few in the Bay Area, and the well-bred Van Reynegoms quickly became part of the social and cultural life centered at the U.S. Army Presidio. It was there that the captain's daughter, Amelia, met a 24-year-old newspaperman named Frank Morrison Pixley. Writings at the time hint of a long but rather romantic courtship, and they were married in 1853.

*\*The name is shown as Reynegon, Reynegom, and Reynagan in various official documents*

## Frank M. Pixley & Amelia Van Reynegom

### When Amelia Van Reynegom marries Frank Pixley in 1853, she sets the course for the history of Corte Madera

Frank Morrison Pixley, a young journalist with a law degree, rode into the west from upper New York state on a mule in 1848, traveling with a wagon train out of Independence, Missouri. He prospected for gold on the Yuba River for a year, then came to San Francisco to practice law.

During vigilante days, Pixley was elected San Francisco City Attorney and then elected to the State Assembly before advancing to the office of State Attorney General in 1862. He held a seat on the first San Francisco Stock Exchange Board, served as Regent of the University of California, and was a member of the Yosemite National Park Board, as well as a Trustee of the State Mining Bureau.

At the age of 53, Pixley founded a literary magazine, the San Francisco Argonaut, which carried the writings of Mark Twain and Ambrose Bierce among others. He published and edited the Argonaut for the next eighteen years, until he died, and the magazine continued to be published until 1958.

***Historian Bailey Millard said:***

*Pixley probably exerted a more commanding influence upon the public mind of California in his time than any other man. In his turn he was a lawyer, miner, journalist, politician and capitalist. His voice was heard afar. He made and unmade men.*

***Catharine Pixley Robson wrote:***

*In an age when San Francisco was known for its many superlative personalities, Frank Morrison Pixley still stands out as a man of exceptional wit, intellect, and sophistication.*

Although the Pixleys lived in a fashionable mansion near the Presidio, occupying the block bounded by Union, Steiner, Green, and Pierce Streets, they often retreated to the tranquility and ambience of the rustic Van Reynegom ranch in Corte Madera.



In 1871, land speculators representing the Reed heirs sued to force the Van Reynegoms off the family homestead. Pixley paid \$2,000 in gold coin to buy title to the property, and he also acquired an adjacent parcel of 30 acres.

After Capt. John Van Reynegom died in 1878, Amelia and Frank took over the ranch, and they gave it the name of Owl's Wood. There were several other families living on the property, most of them employed in farming and taking care of the livestock.

Amelia usually stayed in the Pixleys' San Francisco mansion, while Frank Pixley enjoyed Owl's Wood as a retreat where he composed salient commentary for the Argonaut.

The serenity of Owl's Wood would not last, however. The North Pacific Coast Railway had gained permission to lay tracks across the land in 1873, and the County of Marin obtained a public easement to legalize the long-existing dirt road linking Sausalito to San Rafael, which crossed through the fields of Owl's Wood.

Increased use of the road created deep ruts that filled with mud, and the Pixleys' pasture fences were repeatedly taken down by recreation seekers. Frank Pixley's niece, Catharine Pixley Robson, wrote:

*Picknickers, being hauled through the farm on flatcars for cheap railroad excursions, pelted Amelia's stock with rocks and bottles. Amelia struggled, sometimes almost consenting to sell, but always pulled back.*



But by 1891 the aging Pixleys were finding it difficult to manage their rustic country estate. Frank Pixley offered Owl's Wood for sale in 1891 at the price of \$75,000. There were no takers, and Pixley died four years later without having made a sale and without a child to inherit the estate. Before his death, Pixley transferred the title to Owl's Wood to his wife, "to safeguard it from lawyers and unexpected heirs."



*Corn fields at Owl's Wood, the former Van Reynegom ranch, about 1890.*



*Looking toward Larkspur across the fields of Owl's Wood, about 1894.*



# MY COUNTRY PLACE, OWLS WOOD

**Corte Madera, Marin County,**

**Containing about 190 Acres,**

## IS FOR SALE

It is timbered with oak, madrone, bay, eucalyptus, laurel, and redwood trees. It lies on the east side of the Coast Range Mountains, embracing the foot-hill and valley lands lying between Mt. Tamalpais and the bay of San Francisco.

The soil is a rich alluvial, capable of the highest cultivation, and is watered by springs that rise upon the land and form living streams that empty into the bay of San Francisco. Water is abundant, and catchment may be made and reseroured to the extent of millions of gallons.

The place commands a view of Mt. Tamalpais, the bay, and the opposite shores of Contra Costa. It is traversed through its centre by the North Pacific Coast Railroad. The station (Corte Madera) is twelve and one-half miles from San Francisco, and is located upon this land. The distance from San Rafael is four and one-half miles, on the road toward San Francisco. The village of Larkspur, with twelve new houses and an eighty-room hotel in process of erection, is within one-half of a mile of the farm, while the village of Mill Valley is less than three miles from the place. The Donahue railroad passes along the entire water-front. The time of transportation is forty-five minutes from San Francisco, every hour.

For the accommodation of the farm-house, there is a stone reservoir, holding 85,000 gallons of

water, capable of being increased at small expense to ten times that amount, and distributable in pipes already laid through the grounds, to supply the main dwelling, farmhouse, carriagehouse, vineyard, orchards, and nut-bearing and olive-bearing trees.

Upon the farm are an old-fashioned, broad-porched farmhouse, embowered in groves and surrounded with vines and fruit-bearing trees, a comfortable farm-cottage, with one hundred olive-trees in full bearing, a spacious barn, a new and modern coach-house, corrals, dairy-house, with inclosures for cows, pigs, chickens, etc. Vineyards, orchards, shade and fruit-trees, embracing about twenty-five acres, located upon the extreme border of the place, at the mouth of one of its most attractive glens, may be negotiated for separately.

In point of soil, climate, water, view, and vicinage to San Francisco, there is no place in the State more desirable. It is thoroughly protected from winds and fogs by intervening hills that guard it from the ocean.

The whole farm is well fenced and covered with ornamental shrubbery. Title perfect, with Spanish grant, and has been in the possession of the family of the vendor for a period of over forty years, and is for sale as an entirety or in subdivisions. If sold as an entirety, the price is \$75,000, which will embrace everything except the live stock and the household furniture. This makes the cost of the land about \$400 per acre. Lots are selling at Larkspur, in the valley of San Anselmo and in the vicinity of San Rafael, at prices far in advance of this amount; while lands the same distance and time from San Francisco, in Alameda County, are worth not less than \$4,000 per acre.

This whole property is for sale on easy terms that shall net the seller five per cent interest per annum. Only sufficient money will be required in advance to secure the faithful carrying out of the terms of the sale.

**FRANK M. PIXLEY**

Argonaut Office

Apply to

**THOMAS MAGEE**

Real-Estate Agent

At 20 Montgomery Street, San Francisco