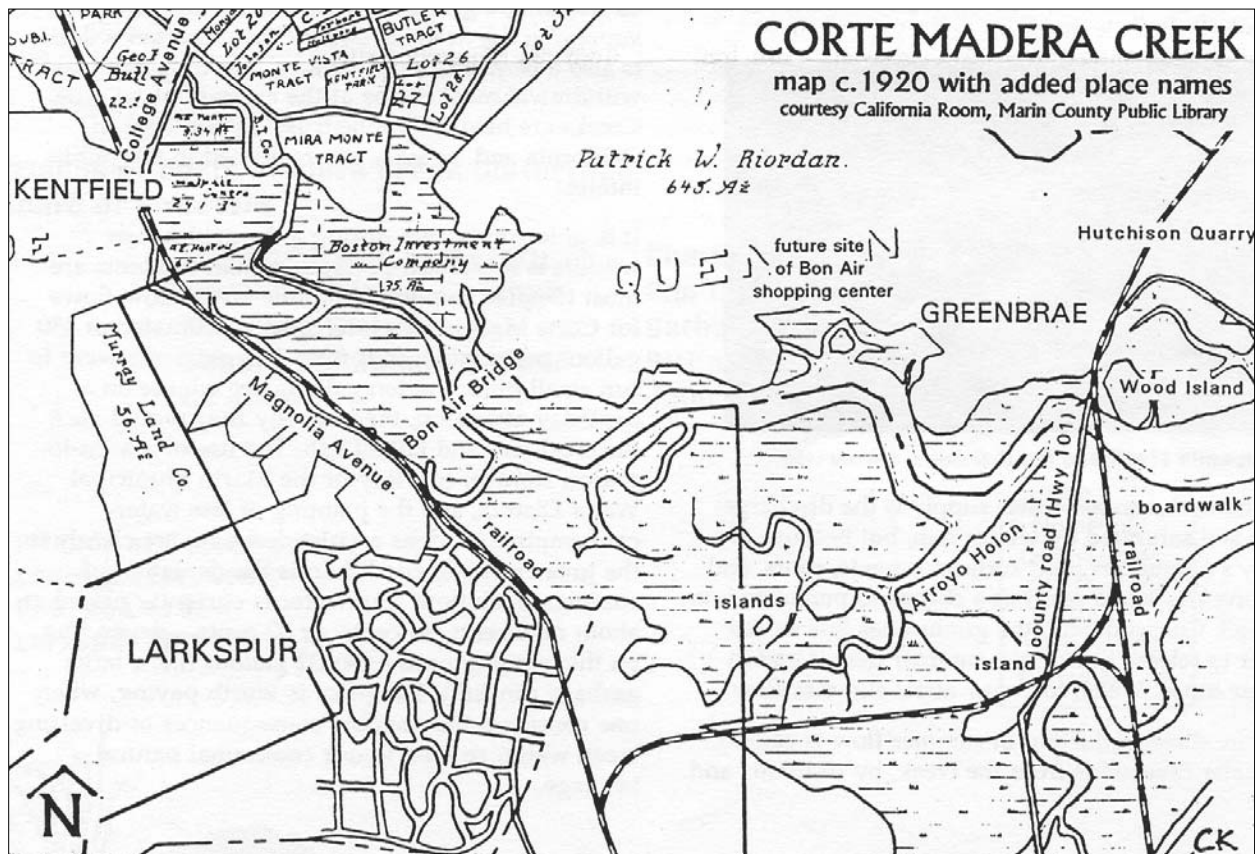


A Trip on Corte Madera Creek

by Harry Richards

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In 1850 the Corte Madera salt marsh extended from the bayshore westward to the toe of the hills and along Magnolia Avenue to Kentfield. The construction of the railroad from San Rafael to Tiburon in 1884 divided the marsh, and a levee built along the south bank of the creek all the way to Magnolia Avenue completed the exclusion of salt water west of the levee. East of the railroad tracks the salt marsh remained, ending at the open water of the bay at a shoreline which was almost exactly where it is now. West of the railroad fill the marsh dried up and became hayfields or pasture. In very rainy years the fields became a freshwater lake and had to be pumped out. Corte Madera Creek remained a salt-water estuary, draining all the stream of the Ross Valley along a route close to the present one. Half a mile upstream a large branch went off toward Larkspur, past two charming marsh islands, and received the flow of the Arroyo Holon (Larkspur Creek). These islands were wooded with oak and madrone, and toyon trees hung out over the water. The islands were leveled in the late 1940s to provide fill and a solid foundation for Redwood High School. The construction of the Greenbrae Marina subdivision finished off the salt marsh in this area. The Arroyo Holon now drains through a canal running beside Piper Park.



My contacts with the Corte Madera marsh and creek date from about 1925 when I acquired a leaky 12-foot rowboat. From then on I was able to penetrate to every part of the area; to the end of every minor branch of the sloughs. We can best see the creek as it was then by climbing into this boat and rowing upstream in the main channel. My narration will describe what we would have seen.

The mouth of the creek is marked by a high voltage power line on tall steel towers. This line was built about 1914 to power the Panama-Pacific International Exposition, and still supplies power to southern Marin. The creek is very wide here. The Remillard brickyard, with its tall chimney, is on the

north shore, but the plant is shut down. The Hutchison quarry (now the site of Larkspur Landing) has just been opened and there is blasting every day at 4:30 p.m. A channel branches off to a barge loading dock (at the site of the present ferry dock). The barges carry conical piles of blue crushed rock delivered by a conveyor belt—perhaps 300 tons per barge—and are towed away several times a week to other Bay Area ports. This is done only at high tides, as the channel is not very deep.

As we row west, up the creek a few hundred yards, we come to the first houses on the left. These are served by a boardwalk, two planks wide, coming down from the county road. Some of the houses are floating arks, moved here from Belvedere Cove, but most are little more than cabins, built on redwood mud sills and uprights to keep the floors above the highest tides.

The owners of these boardwalk homes are mostly weekenders who take the train from San Francisco to Greenbrae station and walk down to their houses from there. Their objective is fishing in the summer, duck hunting in the winter, and comradeship at all times. The north side of the creek has only a few houses. We soon come to Dean's Island (now known as Wood Island), a delightful wooded hummock, completely wild except for a red house at the waterside. There is an Indian shell mound on the island crest. Beyond the red house there is a small sandy beach, hard bottomed, where we swim in the summertime. The beach is also used to careen the larger boats for cleaning and painting as there is no dry-dock in the area.

We soon reach the railroad bridge, which is about 12 feet above the water. It is double-track, laid on large timbers atop huge redwood pilings. There is a concrete and steel draw span at the channel, bascule type, hand operated. There is a lot of action here. Steam-drawn freight trains go and come from Tiburon and San Rafael several times each day and night. Electric passenger trains rattle across to join the main line at Baltimore Park and thence to Sausalito. Once through the bridge we see a rather primitive wooden draw-bridge about 100 feet ahead. This carries the county road, Tiburon Boulevard, across the creek. The road is narrow and unpaved and has little traffic.

This bridge has another use as well. Scow schooners loaded with bales of hay come up the creek, tie up alongside the bridge, and off-load the hay for transport to local dairies. At the north end of the bridge, the road is crossed by another road coming from Kentfield and going through the prison grounds to the Richmond Ferry. There is a small settlement at the crossroads, with a store and boat rental operated by the Flynn family.

Now we go under the wooden bridge and enter into the upper reach of the creek. There is a marvelous view of Mt. Tamalpais and its foothills. There are arks and houses on both sides of the creek for about a quarter mile. Those on the south bank are built on top of the levee that dikes off the area behind. We soon come to the slough branching southwest that carries the drainage from Larkspur Canyon. Here the main creek curves north, following the hill along a rocky shoreline, with trees hanging over the water. There are a few houses in this delightful setting, and these can be reached by land from the Kentfield road.

The creek turns west again at this point and we are traversing an area which will later be occupied by the Bon Air shopping center. There are no houses along this stretch. At the present site of the Bank of America we come to the sewage treatment plant for Sanitary District No. 1. This does only primary treatment and the discharge goes directly into the creek. Local opinion agreed that "the effluvium was very depressing."

Now the creek goes around a rocky point (at the end of South Eliseo). Here we have arks and houses again on the left, served by boardwalks 1, 2, 3 and 4 all coming from Magnolia Avenue. Further along we come to a rustic swimming resort, with change rooms and some boats, which was run by Mr. Hill. The creek mud is as black as ink, and we don't do much swimming here.

Soon we come to the flimsy Bon Air bridge which carried guests to the hotel of that name. Now, in 1925, only some palm trees and a derelict swimming pool remain. Here there are arks on both sides as the creek continues toward Kentfield. (The creek at this point was completely altered by the Army Corps flood control project. A remnant of the original channel still remains along McAllister Avenue between Stadium Way and Berens Drive. A large sand bar here was a popular swimming spot; nobody worried about water quality.) This journey ends at the College Avenue bridge, as my rowboat can't go any further.

In those days the Corte Madera marsh and creek teemed with wildlife. Under water there were bent-nosed clams, ribbed mussels, various crabs, barnacles, teredos and gribbles that ate all the wood within reach. Year-round birds included various gulls, great blue herons, night herons, cormorants, clapper rails, various sandpipers, killdeers, marsh sparrows, meadowlarks, blackbirds and various hawks. In winter came the coots, various diving birds, sawbills, ruddy ducks, canvasbacks, scaups, golden eye and pintails. An occasional flight of long-billed curlews appeared. There were no lesser or greater egrets, and I have no recollection of the many large shorebirds that we now enjoy. Striped bass were plentiful on the flats and in the channels; in fact the ark colony along the creek existed mainly for the pursuit of the striped bass, and on weekend nights the air along the boardwalks was redolent with the aroma of frying fish. There was a winter run of salmon and steelhead in the creek, but this was never very important. Small perch—we called them “pogies”—could be caught around the bridge pilings. Plants were much as now: cord grass, pickleweed and *Grindelia* along the edges of the channels, and salt grass at the higher elevations.

These are the things I remember.

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