

## Growing Up in Greenbrae

by Ann Thomas

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Growing up at mid-century, before the hills above Sir Francis Drake Boulevard were covered with homes and apartments, before there was Bon Air Center or Kentfield Gardens, Grant Gildroy recalls a life and a landscape dominated by the creek running through it.

Grant was raised on Almenar Drive—one of the first streets developed in the Greenbrae subdivision—and Los Cerros Drive where his parents still live. He now lives in Corte Madera with wife Jill and son Alex; an older daughter Kim teaches college psychology. He attended Greenbrae, Kent Middle and Redwood High schools, and life for him focused on the waterway.

Greenbrae during the early 1950s was very different from what it became a decade later. On the Larkspur side of the creek, sparse development along Magnolia Avenue threaded its way into downtown Larkspur, before Skylark and Hillview subdivisions were laid out. On the Greenbrae side, oaks and native grasses covered the hills and flats along Sir Francis Drake Boulevard from San Quentin to Kentfield and down to the creek. The only business at what later became Bon Air Center was Bon Air Super, a freestanding grocery store on the site of the current Wells Fargo bank. It was “the first automated supermarket in Marin,” Grant recalls.

A pedestrian bridge at the future site of Bon Air Road linked the two sides of the creek, while to reach downtown Larkspur from Greenbrae by car it was necessary to drive to Kentfield Corners and turn south onto College Avenue.

Living in sparsely developed Kentfield and Greenbrae was “like being in the country,” said Grant.

An ark owned by a Gildroy cousin was moored, with ballast in its hull, on a pickleweed patch that was occupied years later by Straw Hat Pizza and which is now the Creekside housing complex. The ark was a favored summertime haunt, and was one of a row of these craft linked by a boardwalk that extended to the current location of Larkspur Isle. They were occupied by an assortment of permanent and temporary residents.

From the ark Grant and his friends played, swam, fished, hunted, and searched the creek banks for bottles to throw in the water. He even remembers watching people water water-skiing in the creek in the 1960s.

The arks were relocated or destroyed in the 60s, he recalls, when the Army Corps of Engineers began its flood control project, the still incomplete undertaking that massively altered the creek up to the Ross Post Office, including putting it in a concrete channel through Kentfield.

Besides witnessing the construction of the controversial flood control channel, Grant saw marshes filled in throughout the 50s to facilitate development along South Eliseo Drive, in



*Bessy Gildroy, Grant’s mother, was photographed in 1950 crossing the pedestrian footbridge to access arks on the other side of the creek from Sir Francis Drake Blvd. (They could also be accessed by a boardwalk from Magnolia.) The bridge was in the approximate location of Bon Air Bridge, but at a different angle because of a different alignment of the creek. The view istowards the present location of South Eliseo Drive.*

Hillview and Kentfield Gardens. Fill taken from the hill that later became the Skylark apartments was trucked across Magnolia to fill the flood plain where Hillview would be built.

What later became South Eliseo Drive was open land and marsh, vacant except for a couple of hillside homes. Near the creek, next to a large boulder that is still prominent on South Eliseo going east before the road starts sloping uphill, was the now-vanished Polliwog Pond, named for its springtime inhabitants. Though only two to three feet in depth, it was a popular splashing hole for youngsters who clamored on the boulder to jump into the water, and the spot was also rumored to be an Indian burial ground.

For Grant, his five siblings and friends, the creek, hills, fields and marshes of the lower reaches of the watershed were a perfect playground. An abandoned boat that floated in on the tide was caught, patched, and fitted with a 3-horsepower motor, then put to work exploring the waterway from College of Marin to the creek's eastern terminus in the Bay.

A birding enthusiast, Grant regrets today that as a teenager he hunted ducks on ponds along Riviera Circle and on marshes off Redwood Highway in Corte Madera. Occupants of homes and arks along the creek, he said, would "pop the ducks off their back porches." "Now every bird to me is a miracle," he said.

He credits his teen years of hunting with sharpening his ability to differentiate species and with helping build the foundation for a lifelong advocacy for wildlife. In his youth he hunted canvasback, scaup, ruddy duck, pintail and a few mallard, occasionally saw a cinnamon teal or single wigeon, hardly ever a green-winged teal or Canada goose. Although fish and turtles in the creek may have diminished in quantity, he no longer sees king snakes, and polliwogs are nowhere to be seen on South Eliseo, he believes some species of wildlife are more abundant in the lower watershed today than they were a half century ago. He rarely saw a mourning dove as a child, although that species is abundant today, as are Canada geese. Nor does he recall deer at all – probably, he conjectured, because they were hunted at that time on the fringes of the valley.

Last year Grant also observed an otter playing in the abandoned creek channel near Friends' restoration project at the Ecology Study Area off the multi-use path.

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