

## A Creek Runs Through It: Larkspur

*Excerpted by permission from Larkspur Past & Present A History & Walking Guide,  
by the Larkspur Heritage Committee  
2001*

Creeks played an important role in Larkspur's early history. A waterway facilitated the removal of redwood lumber, water became the scene of weekend revelers, and Larkspur Creek water supplied the young town's homes and ranches.

The town had its beginnings in 1834 when John Reed received the Mexican land grant Rancho Corte Madera del Presidio, which is Spanish for "wood-cutting place for the Presidio (San Francisco)". This grant reached from Point Tiburon to Arroyo Holon (Larkspur Creek). In 1849, after Reed's death, the Baltimore and Frederick Trading and Mining Company of Baltimore, Maryland, set up its sawmill on land leased from John Reed's widow to harvest the redwoods of the Baltimore/Madrone canyons.

Secretary Daniel Taylor of the company recalled in a 1914 newspaper article, "When we arrived at Larkspur, there was no one to meet us. The country was a wilderness, with wild geese in abundance. After the new mill was installed, we erected our dwellings and proceeded to get out the lumber. I can picture the majestic redwoods that covered the flat where Larkspur stands today. Some of the trees were eight feet in diameter and lifted their immense bulk 300 feet upward."

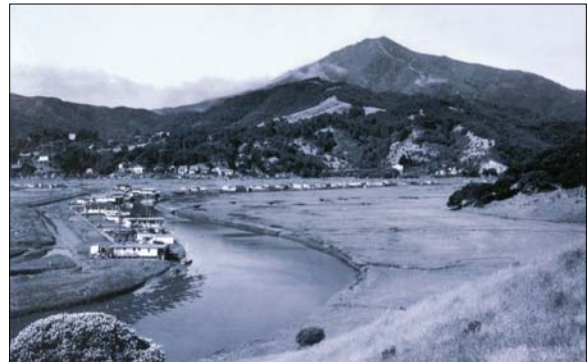
The newspaper account also reported the Thanksgiving hunt when a group went looking for a deer and some wild turkeys for its feast. "Several of the party started out on the hunt and had proceeded but a short distance when they spied a large, vicious looking animal quietly sitting on his haunches on a large log in the canyon. The bear sighting the small army, made a dash for liberty. The hunters followed in pursuit and before night returned with a 375-pound black bear. He was beautiful and the boys had the feast of their lives for a week on bear meat."

During the time of the Trading Company, timber was hauled out of the canyon by teams of oxen and taken to the slough leading to Corte Madera Creek (near the current location of Larkspur Plaza Drive). Creek waters were harnessed to turn the waterwheel for power to mill the redwoods and they were then delivered to San Francisco across the bay. Captain Lauff of Bolinas conceived the idea of forming a raft of the redwood logs and towing them. The first raft consisted of 60,000 board-feet of lumber. Thrice-weekly barges hauled by the steamer "Ida" towed milled lumber down Corte Madera Creek and across to San Francisco.

By the early 1860s, the forest had been clear-cut and only vestiges remained. Commented Judge Samuel Gardiner, who lived adjacent to the mouth of the canyon in the early 1900s, "One thing that is not appreciated today is the character of the redwood growth that existed here. There were thousands of redwood stumps ranging from five to 15 feet in diameter at the point of cutting...thousands of them." At this time the canyon was a popular summer campground for San Franciscans.

After lumbering had denuded the hills, causing Larkspur and Corte Madera Creeks to be filled with silt from the run-off, ranching and dairying became more popular. There were four large dairies/farms that stretched from Baltimore Canyon to San Francisco Bay on diked and drained marshland. These dairies also caused the loss of native vegetation and the resultant erosion and downcutting of upland creeks.

Homeowners and ranchers dug wells and installed pumps which in summer often pumped the creek dry. According to Thorpe Wright, son of the early landowner, there was a pump in the creek at the west end of Dolliver Park which was powered by a blindfolded horse which went round and round to



*Corte Madera Creek and Larkspur prior to World War II. Photo courtesy The Art Center, San Anselmo*

pump out the water. Wells were located at the entrance to Madrone Canyon, at Olive and Madrone Avenues and at the Kentfield border. A water wagon was filled every Saturday morning, and the road was watered down so that prospective property buyers wouldn't get dusty shoes while looking at property.

At 215 Magnolia Avenue, a home completed in 1901, a well under the kitchen supplied the house with water and was supplemented by another well in the lower corner of the property, near the creek. According to Judge Gardiner the creek here was about nine feet across and about 25 feet deep. Today in summer Larkspur Creek at this location is only about two feet at its deepest. He recalled in a 1983 interview that he, his brother and father built a pump house near the creek and installed an electric motor to water their extensive garden, running it "all day long, every day, all summer."

Although we no longer rely on the creek for drinking water or irrigation it continues to provide us with amenities, recreational opportunities, and increased property values. It also is home to birds and vital to other wildlife. Night herons still roost in the tops of the redwoods. Judge Gardiner mentioned their presence in the early 1900's: "I remember well there was a large colony of night herons which nested in the redwood tops of the Baltimore Canyon and nightly flew to the marsh area to hunt for shell fish. They stayed all night and came back at dawn."

Today, as we continue to urbanize and plan for the future, we must protect our waning creek resources. With every new development there are opportunities to increase property values, protect and restore native vegetation, and restore floodplain values by setting back new structures from the creek.

Any use of text and photographs for other than personal purposes is prohibited without permission from Friends of Corte Madera Creek Watershed

All photographs © 2004 Charles Kennard unless otherwise credited

Website design by Karen Peterson, San Anselmo

Friends of Corte Madera Creek Watershed  
P.O. Box 415, Larkspur, California 94977 phone: (415) 457-6045 fax: (415) 457-6362  
info@friendsofcortemaderacreek.org