

## Looking Back on the Ross Valley

by Charles Kennard

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The summer twenty-odd years ago when I moved to the Ross Valley from my interim home in San Francisco, I was struck not only by the verdure of the gardens and wooded hillsides, but also by the acres of asphalt seemingly flowing like hot lava in all directions, extinguishing all life-forms in its path. Ugly, too, were the “modern” buildings and makeovers from the 50s and 60s. San Anselmo Creek was an ignored detail — until it announced its importance by submerging all of the towns of the Ross Valley with up to five feet of flood water.

Peeling back the years of the valley’s past adds a richness and a logic to what we see around us today, adding these to both the ugly and to the beautiful. Consequently we tend to overlook the ugliness and enhance the beauty. Imagining the hayfields that once stood in the vicinity of the Seminary calls up memories of the seasons and smells of fields we have known elsewhere, and we can see men and women making the hay as a cloud of steam and soot from a passing train blows over them. Traxler Road, behind my home in San Anselmo, is a steep street of suburban homes looking towards the apparently timeless flanks of Hawthorne Canyon; but a hundred years ago the whole landscape was blanketed by the vineyards of Camille Grosjean, who supplied local resorts and his liquor store in San Rafael. Under Memorial Park and the Red Hill Shopping Center parking lot runs a drain that was Sorich Creek; we can picture the creek in former times as a spawning ground for salmon and steelhead trout when the willow leaves were opening out.

We can believe that, just as our forerunners changed the course of events, so can we, to make this a healthier environment and community. History is not an inevitable march to another’s orders: the encasing of Corte Madera Creek in concrete was accomplished in the 1960s, and it could be undone by another generation of citizens; Hawthorne Canyon was recently preserved as open space by public and private subscription, pre-empting development.

When I experience retrospection colored by debilitating nostalgia, I try to call to mind the life-force of creative people working to improve our community today, and of nature, which tirelessly tries to heal the affronts it has suffered. The past can be seen as a model for what is possible — and this is certainly the case with creek restoration projects (although with global climate change we may well be looking elsewhere for models).

The Ross Valley has been through several dramatic transformations since pre-Hispanic times a mere two hundred years ago, and nearly three-quarters of this time period has been documented by photographers who were doubtless aware of the rapidity of the changes taking place. The most famous was Eadweard Muybridge, early experimenter with moving pictures, and recorder of activities at Ross Landing, once a busy wharf on Corte Madera Creek. Other photographers used the vantage point of Red Hill for panoramic views, flattered the owners of grand estates such as Fern Hill with their art, or joined the promotion of the valley as real estate.

Thanks to the enthusiasm of local collectors, many of the visual records of by-gone days in the Ross Valley have returned home for us to marvel over.

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