

Meanderings in History

by Charles Kennard
2007

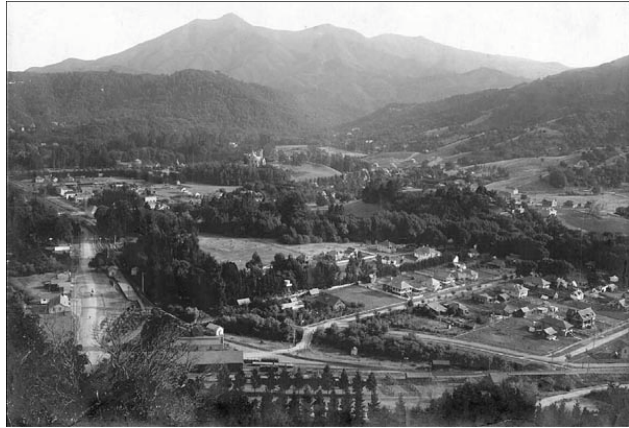
A few years ago a sinkhole mysteriously appeared in the Bolinas Park lawn in Fairfax during a storm, and at the same time a part of the road behind Fairfax Inn unexpectedly subsided. It turned out that Fairfax Creek was remembering its old course, which led from Town Hall via the site of Fairfax Theater, to join San Anselmo Creek behind the Post Office. Bridge parapets are still visible at the beginning of Pacheco Avenue. Sometime around 1930 the creek had been rerouted and buried in a culvert under the length of Sherman Street and under Dominga Avenue, from where it now emerges as a waterfall seen from a footbridge entered from Bridge Court. Unfortunately, the culvert was built too small for stormwater flows, and the water runs so swiftly that the culvert is impassible for migrating steelhead.

Fairfax Creek, and the tidal stretch of Corte Madera Creek were both deliberately rerouted, while there is evidence that in three other areas of the Ross Valley the creek changed its course capriciously, a century or more ago.

A postcard view of San Anselmo seen from Red Hill in about 1910 shows not only the present creek running by the train station at the Hub, but also a distant line of trees indicating another creek which intersected today's Tunstead and Magnolia Avenues, and Pine Street. A map of 1873 records both creeks, which joined near Insalata's Restaurant. The explanation for the two creeks was related by Don Perry in a 1933 interview: in about 1867, San Anselmo Creek blocked with debris— near Madrone Avenue and Center Boulevard — and abruptly swung east, leaving its previous course. So that in an 1875 photograph taken at the Hub, we see a young, shallow creek running alongside a hayfield. Today, all that remains of the abandoned creek bed is a ditch near Myrtle Lane, a storm drain cutting across town from Myrtle Lane and emerging under the Barber Street bridge footing, and a jog in Pine Street where a bridge once straddled the creek.



Murphy Creek at Brookwood Lane in Ross, in summertime..



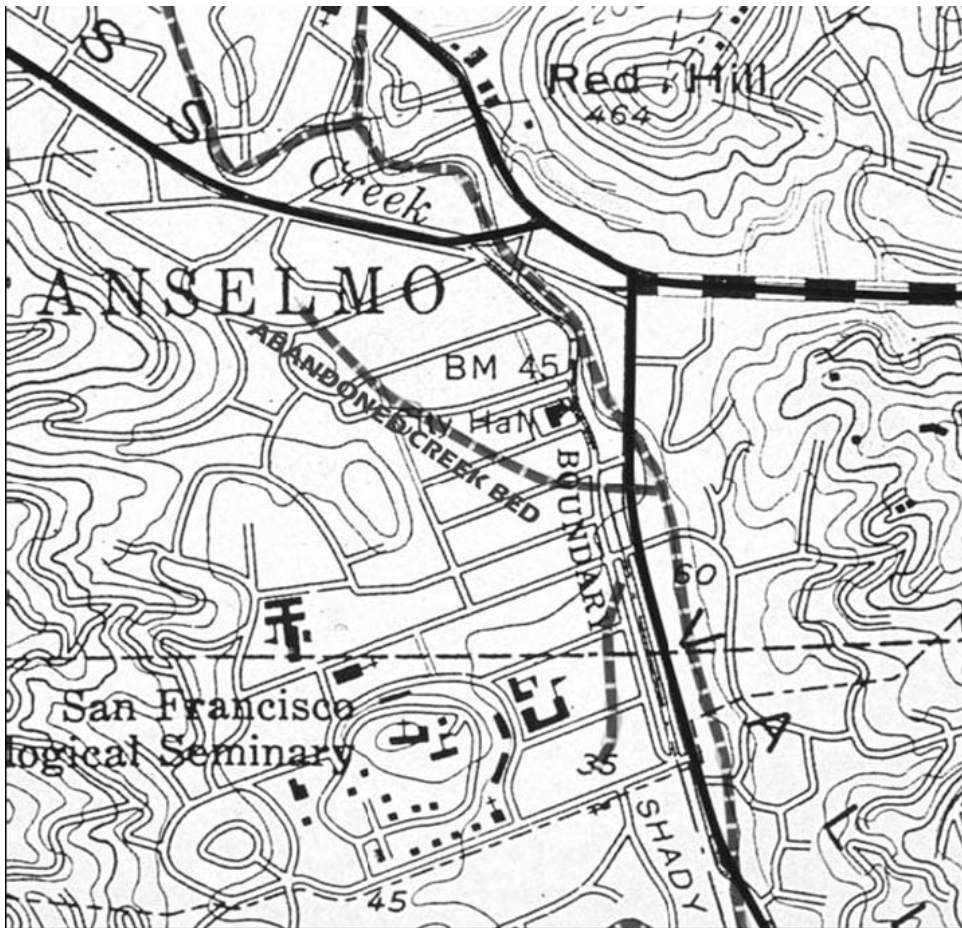
In this view of San Anselmo taken in about 1910, a line of trees running right to left across most of the width of the photograph indicates a creek's course. Photo courtesy of San Anselmo History Society.

The fields between the Seminary and Sir Francis Drake Boulevard, as photographed in the 1890s, were divided by a serpentine body of water apparently disconnected from San Anselmo Creek. It cannot have been a tributary, because its direction diverged from that of San Anselmo Creek. Perhaps in this area San Anselmo Creek formerly ran in a more southerly direction, towards Shady Lane, remaining west of Sir Francis Drake between Ross and Bolinas avenues.

Further down the valley, in Ross and Kentfield, there is a littleknown waterway called Murphy Creek, running parallel to Corte Madera Creek and on the opposite side of Kent Avenue. It begins a

little way north of Lagunitas Road, passes under Ross Common to emerge behind a cabin on the Common, and runs through College of Marin Parking Lot 15, near Hillside Avenue. At Kent Avenue it enters a covered culvert taking it to the likewise interred Tamalpais Creek. Tides surge up the culvert from its double mouth at Corte Madera Creek, and reach as far as Parking Lot 15, as evidenced by growths of pickleweed and bulrush. A map of 1886 shows Murphy Creek and Corte Madera Creek coming together just south of College Avenue. Did Murphy Creek formerly receive all the runoff of the Ross Valley? In any case, it is quite unusual for two streams to run parallel for nearly a mile in a narrow floodplain, unless their sideways movement is restricted.

The behavior of these creeks over the years serves to remind us that the valley floor is their domain: they tend to move and to flood. And we may encounter maples, ash trees, California bays, and other typically streamside trees anywhere in the floodplain



Any use of text and photographs for other than personal purposes is prohibited without permission from Friends of Corte Madera Creek Watershed
All photographs © 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) 456-5052 info@friendsofcortemaderacreek.org