

Saving the Heerdt Marsh

by Jana Haehl

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In this memoir, written in about 1980, Jana Haehl describes her role in the preservation of a large portion of marsh at the mouth of Corte Madera Creek. Heerdt Marsh "is one of the few historic tidal marshes in the [San Francisco] Bay that has never been diked or filled" (BCDC document), and one consequence is the complexity of its branched tidal chan-nel network, formed during the last several thousand years.

Corte Madera's Heerdt Marsh—now the northern section of the Corte Madera Ecological Reserve—is a typical salt marsh, with particularly strong stands of cordgrass, pickleweed, and salt grass. It is the largest piece of salt marsh remaining in southern Marin County, and a survey map of 1890 indicates that this marshland still possesses all the major inlets and has much the same appearance as it did at that time.

Five separate fill and development applications were filed for the 95-acre area during the period from 1968 to 1974. I was part of a coalition of conservationists, local government officials, and concerned citizens, formed to seek alternatives that would result in the preservation of the marsh.

The plan that spurred our efforts in 1974 to acquire the marsh for natural habitat and public open space purposes was one which featured dredging the marsh for a 335-berth boat harbor, yacht basin, and channel. Dredged spoils and imported fill were to be placed on another 47 acres of marsh which would be developed for marine commercial recreation, and other commercial and industrial uses.

After the Bay Conservation and Development Commission (BCDC) turned down William J. Heerdt's request for permits, he filed a lawsuit against me and several others whom he held responsible for thwarting his efforts.

We put together the people, the agencies, and the potential funding sources necessary to acquire the Heerdt Marsh for permanent public ownership under the management of the California Department of Fish and Game as the Corte Madera Ecological Reserve. Much of the work in public education, zoning and planning, and preliminary fund-raising had been done by others through Marin Conservation League, but the opportunity to acquire the property was on the verge of slipping away, with no acquisition funds in sight, when I became actively involved.



Heerdt Marsh, looking towards the Greenbrae Boardwalk. Photo by Charles Kennard

We created some "Friends of Heerdt Marsh" letterhead paper and wrote letters asking for endorsement of the drive to acquire the marsh from every local government and conservation group, as well as many letters to individuals whose endorsement would be helpful. The letters were signed by the well-known local conservationist, Alice Higgins, a longtime member of the National Audubon Society, who had devoted most of her eighty years of life to protecting environmental values.

To create public awareness of the Heerdt Marsh as an important natural resource in imminent danger of

being destroyed, slide-shows and marsh-area hikes were sponsored, and an acquisition fund established.

We enlisted the help of several prominent educators, who agreed to write letters to support the contention that preservation of the marsh would provide a valuable educational opportunity for Marin students, from elementary school through college, to learn about an estuarine environment and directly observe its magnificent eco-system.

The renowned John Thomas Howell, Curator Emeritus of Botany at the California Academy of Sciences, contributed a letter affirming the marsh's priceless intrinsic value, saying that the Heerdt Marsh should be preserved at all costs, and he urged that BCDC's influence be exerted to save it.

BCDC was persuaded to take a tough stand on the permit application when it came before them, and, as a result, they were named as co-defendants in Mr. Heerdt's ten million dollar lawsuit against those of us who opposed his plan. This later proved beneficial for us, because the Deputy State Attorney General who represented BCDC during the litigation, Clem Shute, successfully argued all the public policy issues, leading to a judicial determination that the owner/developer had no vested rights in that application.

We still had no means to acquire the property, since local conservationists led by Lee Miller had raised only about ten thousand dollars over a period of several years. Local, county, state and federal governments had all declined to allocate public funds for acquisition.

All efforts were fruitless, for the project was small, it had no priority on long-standing lists, and the appraised value was relatively high per acre. However, because Marin had suffered substantial shoreline damage in the oil spill of 1972, reparations paid to the State by Standard Oil were committed to the purchase of the Heerdt Marsh through the efforts of State Senator Peter Behr; but an additional \$110,000 was still needed to meet the appraised value.

In 1974 I became involved in Assemblyman John Burton's campaign for the United States congress, representing the Marin-San Francisco district. Running for the first time in Marin, John Burton needed a good Marin-type issue, and some visibility on an environmental cause was suggested as the perfect vehicle, so I enlisted his support on behalf of the Heerdt Marsh. He brought Sacramento officials to the marsh for an on-site evaluation of its merits, and the remaining funding was eventually included as a line item in the 1974-1975 state budget. Clout had been wielded by those in high-level positions, and the agencies to whom so many letters had been sent became eager to support the proposed acquisition. Subsequently, I was able to get a majority of the directors of the Marin County Open Space District to informally commit themselves to matching whatever funds had been raised locally, which brought in additional contributions from local conservationists.

Since Burton's efforts had moved the Heerdt Marsh many notches up on the State's priority list, the State's Deputy Attorney General in San Francisco, Clem Shute, was authorized to negotiate with Heerdt for purchase of the property. In the following months, I represented the Town of Corte Madera in meetings with California Fish and Game and other State agencies in discussions about the management and protection of the marsh. We supported its designation as an ecological reserve, which would give the marsh the protection it needed, but still allowing low-intensity recreational uses such as walking, picnicking, wildlife, and facilities for nature interpretation.

As of 2013, Heerdt Marsh is an essential part of the Corte Madera Ecological Reserve, and is best viewed by the public from the end of Industrial Way, and from a levee outside its southern edge.

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