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FIRST SAWMILL in MARIN COUNTY

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THE FIRST SAWMILL IN MARIN COUNTY

The first sawmill in Marin County was erected and operated by John Read in 18--, at the entrance of Ferny Cascade Canyon on the edge of Rancho Sausalito. It was in what is now Mill Valley,* about one-half mile southwest of John Read's adobe house on Rancho Corte Madera del Presidio.

Various years are given for the building of this old mill - 1833, 1834, 1842, and 1843. It is believed that the mill was built at the earlier date because when the Spanish grant was given to Read on October 2, 1834, the name of the grant was then Rancho Corte Madera del Presidio,¹ which means "the wood cutting place for the Presidio." So prior to that time there must have been timber and lumber cut and rafted across the bay to the presidio at Yerba Buena as San Francisco was then called. Tradition says, that Read built the mill to furnish lumber to build a house for himself and his wife. Certain court proceedings show that Read lived on this grant before the rancho was granted him.

Read erected his mill over the ever-flowing stream that drained from the southern slope of Mount Tamalpais. The

* See Appendix B.

1. J. P. Munro-Fraser, History of Marin County, 389.

frame and the roof of the mill still stands and is about twenty-four feet in length and fifteen feet in width. The timbers of which it is made are very large and apparently hewn. Some portions seem to have been joined with wooden pegs. The method of operation was by whipsaw driven by water power, furnished by damming the stream. There were two wheels, one of which was in place until about twenty-five years ago. The logs were floated down the stream to the mill or hauled by oxen.

It is not known in what year Read built the gristmill to the structure. It was probably after he married and had located permanently on the rancho. He purchased the machinery at Fort Ross in Sonoma County. The stones were made of basalt; the bottom burr two feet eight inches in diameter and eight inches in thickness, with a center hole of one and one-half inches in diameter; the upper stone two feet and one inch in diameter and three inches thick, with a hole four inches in diameter. Horsepower operated the gristmill. The stones, after nearly one hundred years, are in good state of preservation. Stumps of some of the great trees that furnished logs for the mill, are still to be seen, although most of them have been destroyed to make way for streets and gardens.

In many places the mill lode is the only remaining sign of the early pioneer and of the settlement that

followed his path. This old mill that suggested the name "Mill Valley" to the picturesque town is not a mere decrepit reminder of the past, it is a chapter head in California history.

It was at Read's Mill that the first logging of Upper California was concentrated over a century ago. The stout beams, that once held the rasping saw with its scream that stopped only when the sun went down are still intact. The strong beams are symbolic of John Read, the man of remarkable acumen; a citizen who served his adopted country faithfully; the sailor, ferryman, rancher, churchman, miller, builder and the father of pioneers who took his impetuous way to the primitive forces at the cutting edge of civilization to carve his destiny out of the wilderness.

Among the walks from Mill Valley are those to the ruin of the Read Mill; to Muir Woods National Monument, the nearest redwood grove to San Francisco; to flowery Blithedale; to Mount Tamalpais State Park; to Mount Tamalpais tavern on the summit.

The mill was decorated with a plaque by the Outdoor Art Club organized by the ladies of Mill Valley. It is the purpose of the club to preserve the natural beauties of the town and vicinity.

The first visitors to the Marin shores were men engaged in voyages of discovery. After them came the

whalers who, returning from the northwest whaling grounds, found the Bay of San Francisco a secure harbor for their winter quarters. Fresh water was to be had at (Richardson's Bay). The Mexican authorities objected for a time to vessels going there, for fear of smuggling operations, but later Captain Richardson supplied fresh water to the vessels from his Sausalito Rancho.

It was on one of these whaling vessels, on or about July 25, 1826, there arrived from Acapulco,² an Irish sailor, Captain John J. Read,* age 21 years. He settled in Sausalito, and was the first English speaking resident in the mission country of Marin.

Marin was then a frontier of vast wilderness, rugged hills and dense forests where numerous tribes of Indians lived and fought; over the land wandered immense herds of elk and antelope. In all the region as far as the British fur trading posts above the Columbia River, there were no settlements of white men, excepting at Fort Ross, which was founded by Russians in 1812. From San Francisco Bay to Fort Ross, the adobe missions, San Rafael Arcangel and San Francisco Solano were the only evidence of the courageous advance of the white man, who brought religion into the

2. H. H. Bancroft, History of California, III, 176.

* See Appendix C.

Indian country on the northern frontier of California.

Captain Read built a crude board house near the shore in Sausalito and made application to the Mexican government for the land he settled, known as the Rancho Sausalito.* His application for the grant was disapproved by the government in the same year owing to the supposed fact that this tract of land had been reserved for government purposes. Read was not discouraged by the refusal of the Mexicans to grant him the rancho. He was one of the first foreign petitioners for a Mexican land grant. This was at a time when the officials were alarmed over the increasing number of Americans settling in the Sacramento Valley, and by the aggressive Russians entrenched at Fort Ross and Bodega. These facts compelled Governor Figueroa to take an active interest in the establishment of a fort on the northern frontier with San Rafael as military center. He also issued a warning that no foreigner, unless a naturalized Mexican citizen, was to acquire land.

John Read was one of those determined hardy characters of the whaling days. His spirit of adventure brought him to the west and it spurred him on in his struggles against the hard conditions of nature and hostile

* See Appendix E.

surroundings. He made another application in 1827 for one of the ranchos in the country of Chief Solano, in the wilderness of Petaluma Valley. Read received the grant and he named it Rancho Cotati,* after the Indian tribe of that part of the valley. He moved and settled; he made necessary improvements; he tilled and seeded the land and he raised cattle. He suffered much from the hostile Indians who destroyed his crops, killed his cattle and finally set fire to the place, and compelled him to abandon the rancho. He went to Mission Solano and on advise of his friend Padre Jose Lorenzo Quijas³ went to San Rafael and took charge of the property at the mission, serving as major-domo and perhaps as alcalde.

Read became intimately connected with life at the two missions - San Rafael Arcangel and San Francisco Solano. He lived at a time of many perplexing problems; it was the period between the enactment of mission secularization and the final order of sale of the mission property. In the year of 1826, Governor José María de Echeandia made the first definite step to emancipate the Indian neophyte.⁴ The order did not apply to the two northern missions, as they had not been in existence the ten-year period required

* See Appendix D. * See Appendix A.
 3. Bancroft, History of California, III, 718; IV, 86.
 4. Ibid., III, 101-104.

by the law to Christianize, civilize and prepare the Indians to take their place in society, so San Rafael and Solano missions were not among those secularized at that time.⁵

Read served at San Rafael until 1832, and then he returned to Rancho Sausalito, hoping now to locate permanently on this grant, and that his application for the rancho would be approved. He built the first house in Sausalito. He also constructed a sailboat, which he subsequently plied between Sausalito and San Francisco carrying passengers. This was the first ferry boat on San Francisco Bay and the first in California. Read lived at Sausalito, although he never acquired the title to the land. The grant was granted to Don Jose Antonio Galindo by Governor Alvarado on February 11, 1835, and a few years later, it was regranted to William Antonio Richardson, one of the first Englishmen to settle in California.

In 1833, Read applied for a grant to the Rancho Corte Madera del Presidio.* The Rancho was located on the peninsula northwest of Raccoon Strait and extended inland between Punta de Quentin and the Sausalito Rancho.* It contained one square league, 7,849.12 acres. In September 1834, he was naturalized as a Mexican citizen, and on

5. Bancroft, History of California, III, 305.
* See Appendix C. * See Appendix E.

October 2, 1834 he was granted the rancho by Governor Jose Figueroa. It was finally approved on August 29, 1835.⁶

In the same month Ignacio Martinez as commissioner, took charge of San Rafael Mission assisted by Father Quijas and Rafael Garcia and began the work of secularizing the mission. On October first boundaries were assigned to the pueblo San Rafael. The following year, General M. G. Vallejo, who had been appointed commander of the northern frontier, and commissioner of secularization at San Francisco Solano, (which he later renamed Sonoma) took a hand in the secularization of San Rafael. During that year Father Quijas, disgusted with the treatment of the Indians and the management of the secularization proceedings at Solano, withdrew to San Rafael and attended San Francisco Solano merely as a mission station.⁷

In November 1836, Commissioner Martinez turned over the undistributed mission property to Juan Read who acted as major-domo, although unofficially he was entitled "administrator" of San Rafael. The following year, in April 1837, Read was succeeded by Timothy Murphy, who remained in charge at San Rafael until well after the end of the Mexican rule in California. He acted in behalf of General Vallejo.⁸

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6. Bancroft, History of California, III, 711.
 7. C. A. Engelhardt, Missions and missionaries, III, 591.
 8. A. E. Cleaveland, North bay shore during the Spanish Mexican régime, 101.

Juan Read lived at the Rancho Corte Madera del Presidio and built a small house there. It was constructed of split boards placed on end and covered with shakes. He later built an adobe house eighteen by thirty feet, one story high. This building stood in a very dilapidated condition until 1888. From his house he could easily see the San Rafael Mission with its background of foliage and ancient oaks. It stood against the sloping hills that ran down to the beautiful meadows on the waters edge. Cattle roamed the hills, and acres of corn belonged to the mission.

In 1836 Juan Read married Señorita Hilaria Sanchez, who was born in the Presidio at Yerba Buena in 1817. She was the daughter of Don José Antonio Sanchez, who was a member of one of the first Spanish families of California, and captain of the troops at the presidio. Juan Read died in 1843 leaving his widow and four young children; a son John J., born in 1837 inherited his father's estate and was living in 1880 with his wife Carlot Suarez; another son Richard was born in 1839; one daughter Inez, Mrs. Deffenbach, lived until 1880 in the adobe house built by her father, and the other daughter Hilaria, married J. Boyd of San Francisco. The widow of John Read married Bernardino Garcia - three-fingered Jack - the notorious bandit. She had one daughter and died on March 4, 1872 at the age of fifty-five years.

John Read witnessed the changing events of his day.

He watched the Russians desert Fort Ross and he saw the Americans come in. He heard of the growing number of immigrants coming through the gaps of the Sierra Nevada Mountains; he saw exploring expeditions, officers from foreign ships, and curious visitors at Sonoma and San Rafael - Wilkins, Simpson, Pierce, Thomas O. Larkin, Forbes, Duflot de Mofras and Jones. The day was not far distant when the Mexican and American frontier were to meet, fuse and disappear.

As he worked and progressed, Read was the first to import cattle into Marin County, grazing them on his one league of land, the Corte Madera Rancho. He shipped beef and hides to the Presidio. He became wealthy and started construction of his second adobe house in 1843. The site was on a knoll one-quarter of a mile off the highway running from Mill Valley Junction to the town of Mill Valley. The house was twenty-four feet by forty-five feet and two stories high. When finished the house had three rooms upstairs and three rooms downstairs; the partitions were of adobe and extended to the roof. The outer walls were three feet thick and a double porch five feet wide ran entirely around the house. To build the house Read employed Indians, hired at Fort Sutter. But Read died before the house was completed. His daughter Inez Read Deffenbach and her husband occupied the house. The timber used in the construction of his adobe was cut at the Read Mill.

A short distance west of the powerhouse near Manzanita Station, on a slightly elevated mound, is an old orchard. These gnarled trees sheltered for a generation or more the yellow adobe walls of the first settler in Marin. But Nature, with relentless fingers, played about this relic of the past, until little was left, and in 1918 the last of the house was removed and today the site is occupied by a modern cottage. This is not far from the old rancho's pear orchard.

Read's death was premature, but into a short life of thirty-eight years he crowded many vital experiences. His body is in the Catholic cemetery at San Rafael.

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Appendix A.

Father José Lorenzo de la Concepción Quijas was in charge of the San Rafael and San Francisco Solano missions. He was a fearless and able preacher; a large and handsome South American Indian born in Ecuador. He was a muleteer and trader before he joined the Zacatecan College. Quijas had great strength and a resolute character; he was a friend to Captain Read and to the neophytes. He often clashed with civil and military authorities while championing a friend or a cause which seemed to him worthy of consideration.

Engelhardt, Missions and missionaries, III, 591.

Appendix B.

The early settlers of Mill Valley were the Tamal Indians who dwelled in the valleys. Their customs, submission to, and secularization from the San Rafael and San Francisco Solano missions is history. Their remains are symbolized in the shell mounds found in the Tamalpais country.

The county was so named in memory of Chief Marin of the Likatint tribe who fought the white man to retain the Indian frontier north of San Francisco for his people. The chief was captured and imprisoned, but escaped. He

was converted, and died at Mission San Rafael in 1834.

The town of Mill Valley was situated on the land of Rancho Sausalito granted to Captain William A. Richardson in 1838 by the Mexican government, but it was John Read who built the old mill. The land 14,000 acres passed from Captain W. A. Richardson's heirs to the Throckmorton Ranch and then to Mount Tamalpais Land and Water Company, which opened the land as a townsite.

One of the early settlements in this vicinity was Blithedale, so named in 1873 by Dr. John Cushing. Through this sunny place ran the Arroyo del Corte de Madera del Presidio. The original Blithedale Glen, between Eldredge and Cottage avenues has been subdivided and built up as a part of the town of Mill Valley.

The town of Larkspur is located in the northwest corner of Rancho Corte de Madera del Presidio. Here an Indian shell mound formed a knoll practically surrounded by marshes upon which Captain Fremont and some of his soldiers are said to have camped for a time in the summer of 1846.¹

The founding of Mill Valley in 1869 began with one building and a cow shed. The location of the townsite

1. Hoover, Historic spots in California; counties of the coast range, 175.

was undetermined. M. M. O'Shaughnessy, late City Engineer of San Francisco surveyed the tract and the first public sale was made by public auction May 31, 1890. The barn near the railroad yards was the first structure built. Mill Valley became so attractive that before any real building began, picnickers and campers occupied many of the lots. Among those were F. F. Bostich and Charles F. Bunyan. Their faith in the Valley has never waned for they are still residents of the place. The first pretentious residence was built by Alonzo Coffin, another by Dr. Barker and still others by Carl Meyer, Jerome Stanford, Mr. Marcus and Joseph Eastland.

Joseph Eastland was the promoter and the first land company wanted to name the place Eastland. The town and post office for a while was called Eastland, but the people persisted in calling it Mill Valley which name was finally adopted.

Appendix C.

Rancho Corte de Madera del Presidio, consisting of one square league (7,849.12 acres) was granted by Governor José Figueras to Juan (John) Read (Reed, Ried) on October 2, 1834. The rancho was located on the peninsula northwest of Raccoon Straits and extended inland between Punta de Quentin and Sausalito Rancho. On December 23, 1852,

his widow Hilaria Sanchez de Read and her four children, Juan, Hilaria, Inez, and Picardo, filed petition for the rancho amending the petition on June 13, 1854, when it was confirmed by the U. S. Land Commission.

Read's name is spelled Reed, Ried and Read. In most accounts his given name is in Spanish Juan, as John. The given names of most early foreign settlers were changed to the Spanish equivalent.

Munro-Fraser, History of Marin, 110.

Records show that in 1845, Governor Pico granted Doña Hilaria, Tamalpais Rancho, but it was rejected by the U. S. Land Commission in 1850.

Garrison, Romance and history of California ranches, 150.

Appendix D.

Rancho Cotati granted to Juan Cestanada in 1844, was patented to Thomas Page in 1857. Page had been a sheriff in the Sonoma district in 1847. The rancho contained 17,238 acres and lay to the south of Santa Rosa. The Northwestern Pacific Railway passed through it from northeast to southwest, and the station of Cotati in the southwestern quarter

of the rancho. Rancho Cotati was abandoned by John Read after Indians destroyed his crops and cattle.

Appendix E.

Rancho Sausalito which had been refused to John Read in 1826, was granted to Don Jose Antonio Galindo by Governor Juan B. Alvarado, on February 11, 1835. This, a few years after was regranted to William A. Richardson, one of the first Americans to settle in California. A patent for the land containing 19,571 acres was issued to him by the Land Commission December 27, 1853. It was one of the most beautifully located ranchos in the territory, its meadowed shores ran along Richardson's Bay and its bluffs overlooked the Golden Gate; its pastures were thickly wooded with pine and fir trees.