

Protecting Marin Since 1934

## Walk into Conservation History: MARINCELLO 9.29.18

Supplemental historical information and resources can be found online: [www.conservationleague.org/events](http://www.conservationleague.org/events)

Marin Conservation League was founded in 1934 to preserve, protect and enhance the natural assets of Marin County.

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# Marin Conservation League's Walk Into Conservation History

## The Marincello That Might Have Been

Fifty three years ago this November, Marin County approved a master plan for "Marincello," a planned community of between 25,000 and 30,000 residents in the Marin Headlands west of Sausalito. Anticipating approval by a majority of the Board of Supervisors, the *Marin IJ* stated, in early November 1965:

*"It would be wishful thinking to dream forever of keeping these lands in their primeval state, especially under private ownership."*

It took another five years and the determined opposition of dedicated citizens to prove that prophesy wrong.

### Dairying and the Forts

Much of the Marin Headlands was still open after several generations of cattle grazing and dairying on the former Rancho Saucelito Mexican land grant. The United States government, in 1851, had purchased lands clustered around the Golden Gate for strategic defense of the Gateway. The Forts (Barry, Baker, and Cronkhite) were installed, roads and artillery sites were built, Monterey pine and cypress trees (and later, eucalyptus) were planted, and for many years the area was fenced off from the public.

After World War II, the Forts were no longer needed for defense. Efforts were underway to transfer some of the federal lands to the State for parks and recreation. Set back from the Golden Gate and north of the Forts, ranch lands

### Route for Today's Walk

*Our walk begins at the Gerbode Valley Trailhead and parking area. We will proceed a half-mile west on Rodeo Valley Trail and then turn onto the Bobcat Trail for approximately one mile to a grove of cypress, where we will turn back. The route anticipates six stops and is highlighted in yellow on this booklet's cover.*

### Docents

Nona Dennis, Board Member, Former President of Marin Conservation League

Roxi Farwell, Education Program Manager  
Marin Headlands, GGNRA

Doug Ferguson, Attorney  
Former Director, Trust for Public Land

Robert Praetzel, Attorney

Terri Thomas, Director Natural Resources,  
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The original scale model of Marincello pictured here and throughout this booklet, was cleaned, repaired and reassembled by documentary filmmakers Kelly + Yamamoto of Greenbrae, for the KRCB Channel 22 production MOMENTS IN TIME, a public television documentary about the extraordinary efforts of the ordinary people who saved the lands of the Point Reyes National Seashore and the Golden Gate National Recreation Area from development.

The Marincello model is property of the National Park Service/Golden Gate National Recreation Area (GGNRA) Museum Collection.

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were still in private hands. Standing above a broad 2,138- acre valley that descends to Rodeo Lagoon and the Pacific Ocean, East Coast developer Thomas Frouge said: “This is probably the most beautiful location in the United States for a new community.”

## The Visionary Plan for Marincello

With financial backing from Gulf Oil, Frouge introduced his visionary plan to the County in November 1964: “... a community of 50 apartment towers, a sea of single-family homes, low rise apartments, and townhouses. . . light industry, a mile-long central mall with pools and elephant trains, a square bounded by churches called Brotherhood Plaza, and on the highest point in the Headlands a signature hotel” (John Hart: *Bay Nature*, July-September 2003). Construction would go on for 20 years and consume \$285 million in 1964 dollars. A marketing brochure described the future Marincello thus:

“A planning team composed of professional planners and civic leaders has conceived this conservatively planned community with the deepest respect for Marin County’s true traditions, preserving the scenic beauties and natural resources of the site. . . When it is built as planned, with its lagoons, parkways, and slender tow-



TOP: Map of the area slated for development.

BOTTOM: The high rise apartment buildings, as depicted in the Marincello scale model

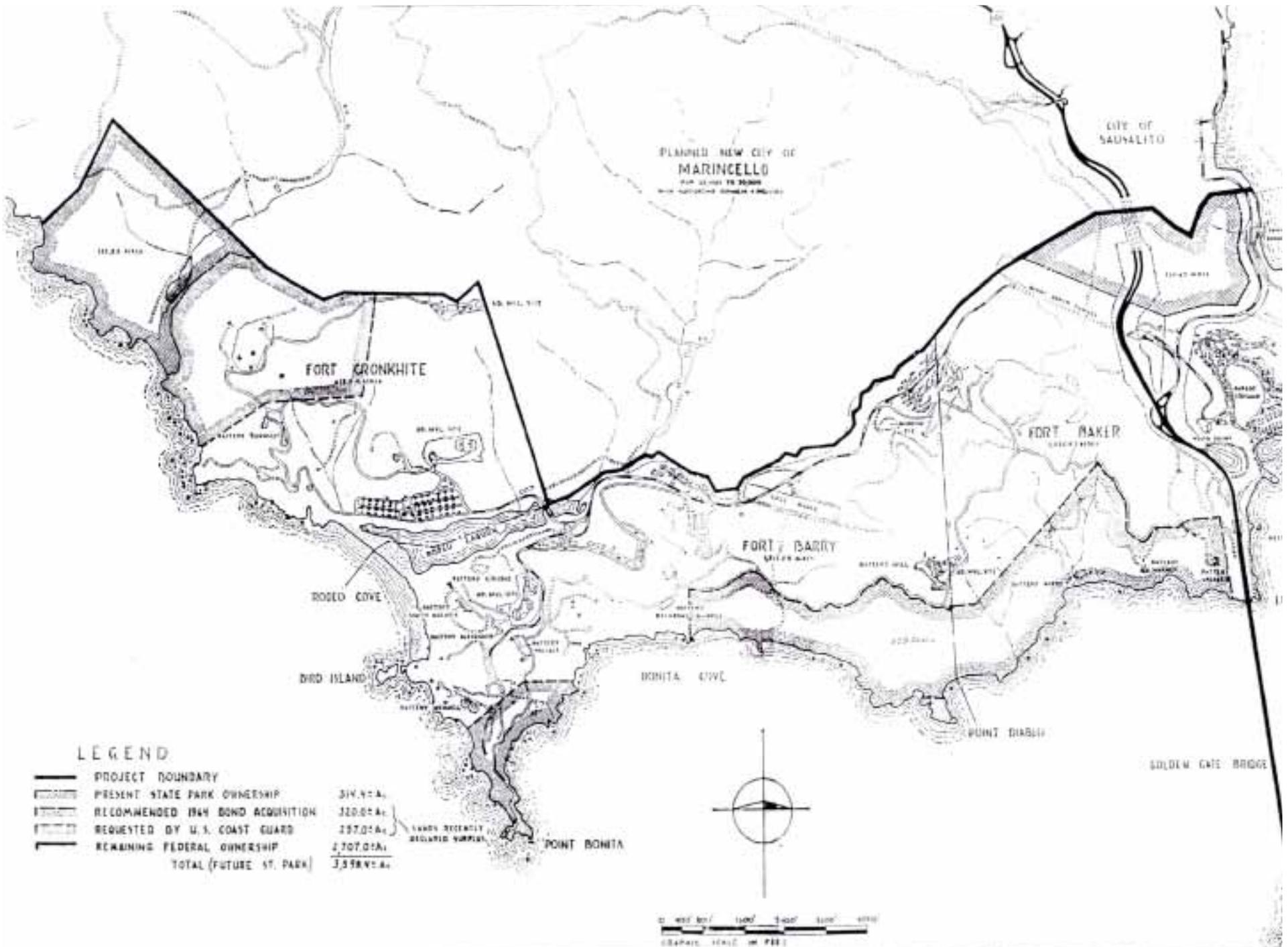


ers, with more open space and greenery among them than within any existing development in the county, Marincello will set higher standards for future local development.”

At a time when educated forecasts for the future (1980) population of Marin County ranged between 295,000 and 400,000, fueled by the new crop of ‘war babies’ coming into adulthood, the idea of this complete community in the Headlands was not as outrageous as it now seems. As a consequence, the plan received remarkably diverse support from community leaders, both conservative and liberal newspapers, and even from many conservationists who believed that the concentration of development would relieve development pressure on other important open areas that could now be preserved.

## Battles Before the Planning Commission

Not everyone agreed, however. During the first half of 1965, the principal Marincello battles were fought before the County Planning Commission. Two MCL board members, including Mary Summers, former Marin County Planning Director, represented the League at public meetings concerning Marincello plans. Most opposition focused not on whether there should be any



AUTHORITY  
STATE RESOLUTION NO. 44  
JANUARY 1944

MARIN HEADLANDS STATE PARK EXPANSION STUDY

OFFICE OF CALIFORNIA-WILDERNESS PLANNING  
DEPARTMENT OF PARKS AND RECREATION  
DIVISION OF BEACHES AND PARKS

LAND AND BOUNDARY STUDY

*The map on the preceding page and its caption (below) are taken from the Marin Independent Journal, Friday April 15, 1966.*

### **MARIN HEADLANDS PARK VS. MARINCELLO**

This map shows the fledging Marin Headlands State Park and its future anticipated boundaries, in relation to the new community of Marincello, which is rising to the north. The state already owns 130 acres (shaded area at the left and around Waldo Tunnel) and 183 acres at Tennessee Cove (shaded area at extreme left.) In between these two state-owned lands are the military reservations of Forts Baker, Berry and Cronkhite. The state is in the process of acquiring 320 acres (from Golden Gate Bridge to Bonita Cove) to get Marin Headlands State Park into operation. The State Division of Beaches and Parks hopes to eventually acquire the rest of the military land so that Marin Headlands State Park will stretch from Golden Gate Bridge to Tennessee Cove...One of the problems of Marincello is access to the new Community State Park officials are reluctant to have the big subdivision pour its traffic into or over the future Marin Headlands State Park.

posed density of the plan. The City of Sausalito resolved not to allow Spencer Avenue or Wolfback Ridge to be widened as access routes to serve Marincello. Concerns were expressed over access through a future State Park. (See map on preceding page and sidebar.) Local residents on Wolfback Ridge and in Sausalito conducted informal tours into the site for Sierra Club, and many others from around the Bay Area came to protest the plan.

By March 1965, the MCL Board was ready to go on record as opposing the plans “as presented.” Their reasons: Residential density was too high; high rise buildings would be out of character with other developments in Marin County; the community would set a precedent for other undeveloped areas in the county; the community could not be as self-contained as promised, and traffic would cause congestion on the Golden Gate Bridge; and, finally, tax benefits claimed by the developer were not realistic. Mrs. Summers had no objection to rezoning the land to Planned Community, but she also recognized that the Marincello land had been included in a proposed Headlands State Park, and that’s where it properly belonged. Ultimately, the Planning Commission forced the developers to scale back from 5.9 dwelling units per acre to 3.5 units, in effect, reducing the community to closer to 20,000 than the 30,000 population first envisioned. The County Planning Commission Chair called it a “. . . cancerous growth on the face of Marin” and resigned.

### **It Only Takes Three Votes— and the Aftermath**

Just one year from the date of Frouge’s intro-

duction of the plan, the Board of Supervisors, on a three-two vote, approved the Marincello Master Plan with a few minor adjustments. Protestors, including MCL, considered a referendum on the Plan and were told by Douglas Maloney, County Counsel, that the Master Plan was not subject to a referendum (the California Supreme Court later ruled that it was). Undeterred, they gathered some 6,000 signatures protesting the Master Plan and filed informal petitions, but these were brushed aside. Subsequently, after a “precise development plan” was approved, petitions with over 6,700 signatures again called for a referendum on the plan. For various reasons, the Marin County Clerk rejected these petitions, and this became the subject of a later lawsuit. Some conservationists seemed relieved to have it “out of their hair.” Beyond contributing to a protest ad placed in the Marin IJ and discussing a recall move with others, MCL did not take further political action. They did, however, send letters to Supervisors Peter Behr and Byron Leydecker thanking them for their leadership in opposing the plan, and to William Gnos, Ernest Kettenhofen, and Thomas Storer expressing “complete disappointment” with their approval.

### **Lawyers Step In**

More aggressive – and more effective – legal action was taken by others. First, local attorneys Robert Conn and Richard Breiner challenged the approval process by filing two lawsuits, the first to have a referendum on the Master Plan, i.e., bring it to a vote of the people, and a second to overthrow the zoning process because it had been done illegally. Conn and Breiner were forced to resign over allegations

Martin Rosen were substituted in their place. Over a period of five years, the referendum lawsuit was tried by Praetzel and Rosen, with the Court ruling against them; Douglas Ferguson joined the team and handled the appeal, in which the California Supreme Court ruled in favor of the County and Gulf Oil; the lawsuit on the Zoning issues was tried by Praetzel in the trial court, where the Court ruled in favor of the County and Gulf Oil; and, finally, Praetzel, in 1970, was successful in appeal.

### **Marincello Boulevard and the Birth of a National Park**

In the meantime, ground was broken in 1966 and construction began on Marincello Boulevard. For many years, impressive gate posts marked the entry in Tennessee Valley to a road that climbed into the hills—to an empty valley. Construction work stopped in 1967, in part due to the pending law suits. The delay may have “saved” the Headlands. Frouge and his backer at Gulf had a falling out. As lawyers continued their work, local opponents doubled their efforts to bring people to the site to see its beauty for themselves. Local opinion began to shift against the project. Frouge died of a cerebral hemorrhage in 1969. In November 1970, a state appellate court found that the plan had failed to follow the law in the zoning approval process and therefore must be submitted all over again (Praetzel’s appeal). The Board of Supervisors withdrew their support for the project the following day!

By then a viable alternative to Marincello was coming into view, and within two years, a national park around the Golden Gate would

be authorized. In 1972, Huey Johnson, western director of The Nature Conservancy, met with Gulf Oil representatives and negotiated purchase of the Marincello site for \$6.5 million and turned it over to the National Park Service for the burgeoning Golden Gate National Recreation Area. In an oral interview several years later, Marty Rosen recalled that The Nature Conservancy viewed the site of Marincello as a “recreation area,” not a significant ecosystem, so had not been entirely happy over the deal. Huey responded: “It’s important that lands where we live and work, as well as over yonder, be respected and

protected.” And that led to the creation of Trust for Public Lands in 1972 – another story. It also captures the essence of America’s greatest urban National Park—the Golden Gate National Recreation Area.



Above: “Aerial” view of the subdivision. Note the pre-rainbow Robin Williams Tunnel at right.

Left: The Marin Headlands today

Aerial photo ©Ian Kennedy, Flickr Creative Commons

# COASTAL SCRUB IN GERBODE VALLEY

*A description of the Marin Headlands on the GGNRA web site begins thus:*

*“An extensive network of trails traverses this landscape of grassland and coastal chaparral. Every hill top offers a panoramic vista point; every valley offers a chance to smell fennel and sage, or catch a fleeting glimpse of a bobcat or bush rabbit. At its heart lies Gerbode Valley, one of the area’s prettiest vales. The National Park Service has been planting native bunch grass on the valley floor; an area once overrun by tough, hoof-proof grazing grasses that were introduced by the Spanish long ago. . . Two floral provinces overlap here, dramatically increasing the number of wildflower species. The area’s foggy coast and dry interior, its hodgepodge of soils, and its many fresh and saltwater zones provide an unusual diversity of wildflower and rare plant habitats. . .”*

Sometimes called “soft chaparral,” the coastal scrub plant community of the Marin Headlands looks much like true chaparral, which occurs higher on the slopes of Mt. Tamalpais. Both communities are dense, low-growing shrubby vegetation on thin, rocky soils; many of the same species can be found in both communities. The difference lies in the greater moisture – fog and salt-spray – near the coast. Coastal scrub varies in height from 1 to 5 feet depending on exposure to wind. Within the dense shrubbery are occasional open areas filled with bracken and other ferns, bulbs, annual wild flowers and grasses. The dense cover provides secure refuge, and abundant fruits, berries, seeds, and associated insect populations offer a rich food resource for a wide variety of wildlife.

Gerbode Valley contains plant species from two main types of coastal scrub that are present along the Pacific Coast – northern coastal scrub, which spreads northward from Monterey county to Oregon, and its southern counterpart, coastal sage scrub, which extends south to Baja California. A broad transition zone includes Marin County, where one can find elements of both, depending on exposure to moisture, sun, and wind. As a result, the coastal scrub on the Headlands includes species such as coyote brush, the dominant plant of the northern community, mixed with California sagebrush, the dominant southern species. A limited list of characteristic plant species would include the following (adapted from Kathy Cuneo, Ph.D.)

Coyote brush  
California sagebrush  
Western poison oak  
California blackberry  
Cow parsnip  
Sticky monkey-flower  
California coffeeberry  
Yarrow  
Seaside woolly sunflower, lizard tail  
Seaside paintbrush  
Silver lupine  
Gumweed  
Soap root  
Seaside daisy  
North coast dudleya  
Coast buckwheat

*Baccharis pilularis* (1)  
*Artemisia californica*  
*Toxicodendron diversilobum* (2)  
*Rubus ursinus*  
*Heracleum lanatum*  
*Mimulus aurantiacus*  
*Frangula [Rhamnus] californica*  
*Achillea millefolium*  
*Eriophyllum staechadifolium* (3)  
*Castilleja wightii*  
*Lupinus cf. albifrons*  
*Grindelia stricta* var. *platyphylla*  
*Chlorogalum pomeridianum* (4)  
*Erigeron glaucus*  
*Dudleya farinosa*  
*Eriogonum latifolium*



Picture...Angel Island as home to a high rise hotel, Bolinas Lagoon as a yacht harbor, a four-lane highway bisecting Marin from East to West, Hamilton with commercial jets instead of homes and a tidal wetland. All of these - and more - could have become a reality. Without MCL, Marin would be a very different place. Join us, and help preserve the Marin you love.

In addition to helping preserve the Marin you love, your membership will also bring you a subscription to MCL's newsletter that will keep you informed about local environmental issues, invitations to special events, field trips, and MCL's annual dinner, and an opportunity to become personally involved in public policy advocacy.

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- \$35 Steward
- \$50 Creeks
- \$100 Baylands
- \$250 Woodlands\*
- \$500 Redwoods
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Card Number

Exp. Date

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sec. code

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All contributions and dues are tax deductible to the extent allowed by law. MCL memberships are calendar-year based.

