

MARIN CONSERVATION LEAGUE - CELEBRATING 85 YEARS

Walk into History - September 28, 2019

Samuel P. Taylor State Park – A Brief History

As early as 1934, the Marin Independent Journal voiced alarm in an editorial (January 4, 1934):

Our picnic spots are nearly gone. 'No Trespassing' signs are posted all over. Papermill Creek, inviting bay beaches from Tiburon to Santa Venetia must be saved. No community on earth is more favored than Marin with the wealth and beauty of potential playgrounds. If we don't acquire some of these lands, the opportunity will surely slip away from us.

The 1935 Marin County Plan, which Marin Conservation League (MCL) had funded, called for public acquisition of lands alongside Papermill Creek, now Lagunitas Creek, but the opportunity to acquire Camp Taylor for the public did not present itself until late 1939. At that, it would take several years of non-stop effort to bring it into the California State Parks system.

Although we know that the indigenous Coast Miwok people inhabited west Marin County area for at least 3,000 to 4,000 years before Spanish settlers arrived, our story begins with the Gold Rush. Samuel Penfield Taylor, a native of New York State, came to California as a '49er and managed to collect almost \$6,000 worth of gold in the mines. In 1855, Sam Taylor arrived in West Marin on horseback, having followed Indian trails through forests and along streams. For payment of \$505 to Mexican land grantee Rafael Garcia, he purchased 200 acres, where he set up the first paper mill on the west coast on what came to be known as Papermill Creek.

Despite the site's remoteness—raw materials and other supplies initially came in, and paper went out, via an ox trail over Bolinas Ridge—Taylor prospered. His Pioneer mill on Papermill Creek supplied virtually all San Francisco's newsprint. After a road (today's Sir Francis Drake Boulevard), and then the North Pacific Coast railroad (1875), came through his property, Taylor's transportation woes eased. He added more than 2,000 adjacent acres and logged much of it. Taylor established the busy town of Taylorville and opened a popular tourist resort, Camp Taylor. The Bohemian Club held its first summer Jinks there, in 1878. He also developed other commercial operations, including a black-powder mill. In 1883, the paper mill was converted to steam power, after Lagunitas Dam upstream sharply reduced the creek's flow.

Taylor died in 1886, at age 58, and was buried on the slope of 1,466-foot Barnabe Peak, named for his old mule. His wife, Sarah, was unable to repay \$100,000 he had borrowed from Alexander Montgomery, who took over the property.¹ On Montgomery's death, his widow, Elizabeth, married his accountant, Arthur Rodgers, and foreclosed on the Taylors.² Elizabeth Rodgers held onto the property but basically ignored it, not even paying the property tax. There

¹ Montgomery also donated the money to relocate the San Francisco Theological Seminary to San Anselmo. He is buried in the Seminary's Montgomery Chapel.

² When Sarah Taylor died in 1907, the Rodgers did not even permit her to be buried beside her husband. (Sarah Taylor was finally reinterred there, from Oakland, in 2002.)

was some public camping, for a fee, at the old Camp Taylor site, but County Health officers halted the practice in 1939 for lack of sanitary facilities.

Boyd Stewart, who owned an adjacent ranch, visited Elizabeth Rogers in her Fairmont Hotel suite in the 1930's and wrote:

She owned property all over California—didn't know where some of it was. Well she told me to go to the [Marin County] Board of Supervisors and tell them she'd give them the Camp Taylor property. 'I'm not going to pay taxes on it anymore. It's no good. Nobody wants it.' I went to the Board of Supervisors and....said that Mrs. Rogers wanted to give Camp Taylor to the county. You'd have thought I'd offered them a rattlesnake. 'What are we going to do with THAT?' they asked. They wanted the taxes, not the property!

The moment of opportunity for MCL arrived in early 1940. Sepha Evers, Verna Dunshee, Helen Van Pelt, and Caroline Livermore, co-founders of MCL (with the exception of Dunshee), began in earnest what would become a five-year campaign to get the land into public ownership. Helen Van Pelt recalled one key incident, when she and Evers were to give California Park Commissioners a tour of the site:

It started to rain, and you know the effects of rain on a redwood grove that is shady anyway. They didn't even get out of the car. They just looked, and our hearts sank. We were sure it was a lost cause. Later, at dinner, a park spokesman announced, 'Ladies, we can't thank you enough for showing us that remarkable property that is only 55 minutes from San Francisco,' and promised to support the project.

The League succeeded in getting Marin County supervisors to pledge \$25,000, the amount of back taxes owed by Rodgers, toward purchase of the property. Next, the League successfully prompted Marin's State Assemblyman to get the State to match the County's \$25,000. Evers made numerous trips to Sacramento, but the matter still dragged, and delinquent taxes grew.

Meanwhile, in the summer of 1942, Helen Van Pelt wanted to demonstrate Camp Taylor's agreeable climate, so she set up the MCL-sponsored Old Orchard Camp on the former Camp Taylor campground. The Works Progress Administration (WPA) provided tents. Youngsters aged 10-16 came for 10-day camping sessions. But World War II reduced attendance below the expected 500—only 25-30 youngsters attended the four sessions—and the camp was closed.

The camp's failure did not diminish the progress of acquisition, however. MCL's efforts at long last succeeded when, in 1945, the State, County, and Mrs. Rodgers finally reached agreement. Rodgers' now \$32,000 in back taxes were forgiven, and Camp Taylor became a State Park in 1945. In 1957, the Park was expanded to include the Memory Grove of redwoods, in memory of Adeline Kent, bringing the total acreage of the Park to 2,882. MCL pledged \$4,000.

In honor of Sepha Evers' special efforts, an interpretive center, which the League helped finance, was dedicated to her June 10, 1978 and a plaque bearing her name was placed on a

bench near the entrance. On August 29th, 2009, on the occasion of MCL's 75th Anniversary, we held a Walk into Conservation History. The bench was long gone, so with Sepha Ever's son Bill, who attended the Walk, MCL initiated efforts to place the plaque in a more permanent stone setting. And that stone remains bearing the plaque, never to disintegrate, close to the Information office at the entry to the Park. Bill Evers died in 2017.

Based on research and writing by Barry Spitz