

The Garden Before Us.

Our Richmond garden is situated in the Wildcat Creek watershed and is blessed with deep, rich alluvial soil.

Imagine standing on this spot 250 years ago, surrounded by lush bunch grasses (purple needlegrass and oatgrass) reaching from the salt marshes at San Pablo Bay to the hills. There are very few trees to be seen, but you see some by looking north to where Wildcat Creek flows by, just a stone throw away. Its banks are lined with sycamores, cottonwoods, alders and lots of willows. The hills to the east are almost treeless, with live oak and bay laurels visible in the canyons. In the spring there are lots of wildflowers growing between the bunchgrasses, and the hills are a solid wall of color. Gold of poppies and goldfields, blues of lupines and brodiaeas, pinks of checker mallows and paintbrushes. Herds of tule elk are grazing around you, and birds are seen and heard calling everywhere.

This was the homeland of the Ohlone Huchiun Indians and their village was further up the creek in Wildcat Canyon (present day Alvarado park). Like today the garden was near a traffic hub with Indians passing on 3 separate trails, all converging where present day San Pablo Avenue crosses Wildcat Creek. One trail followed the creek down to San Pablo Bay (and a major ceremonial area/shell mound on the way), another goes diagonally across the plain to your right and to your left is the main trail for travelling through the area (now San Pablo Avenue). The Huichiun used fire as a tool to change their environment to their advantage, and in the fall they burned the bunchgrasses around you. After the first fall rains the bunchgrasses re-sprouted vigorously, unburdened of thatch — thus providing better eating for the tule elk that the Indians hunted. The wildflowers had more open space and light and would likewise respond with vigor — thus providing good crops of nutritious seed to be gathered later in the year.

A couple of decades later you can see soldiers and a priest travelling on the main path toward the Wildcat Crossing. This is 1772 and the Spaniards have arrived.

Move forward to 1817 and the Huchiun Indians are no longer passing by, hunting or tending the grasslands. Most of them have been relocated to Mission Dolores on the San Francisco Peninsula. Look to the northeast (in present time 2 blocks away where Vale St. crosses Wildcat creek). Christianized Indians (mixed tribes) are building an adobe house for Francisco Castro, the first overseer of the Mission operations here. They are also planting fruit trees and sowing grain fields. You see a substantial number of cattle grazing around you. This is now Mission land.

Although the Spaniards came from a similar summer-dry climate, they were used to annual grasses, not bunchgrasses. They did not appreciate the use of fire and suppressed its use to the detriment of the coastal prairie. The culture of the Huchiun died out within 35 years and with them disappeared the grassland they had maintained for thousands of years.

While Spain had promised to keep mission lands in trust for Indians, Mexico had made no such promises, and after the Mexican Revolution Francisco Castro petitioned and was granted ownership of the San Pablo lands in 1823. You are standing on his Rancho San Pablo land.

Jump ahead a couple of decades and the land you see around you is dramatically changed. The fields of bunchgrasses and large stands of native wildflowers are no more. It is beginning to look like the rangeland you are familiar with.

Castro used the land for grazing his fourteen hundred cattle, six hundred sheep and five hundred horses. The change in land use to an economy based on livestock and agriculture totally changed the plant community, and it happened fast. Cattle feed brought to sustain the cattle on their oversea journey harbored annual grasses and weeds

from the pastures of Spain, and they were thus introduced to the California. Overgrazing during a drought in the middle of the 19th century gave the invaders the edge, and the bunchgrasses gave way to annual grasses. The fields of bunchgrasses and large stands of native wildflowers are no more. It is beginning to look like the rangeland you are familiar with.

In 1846 the Treaty of Guadalupe took California away from Mexico, and American squatters started moving in on the Rancho San Pablo land. The Castro/ Alvarado family lost part of the land to moneylenders from San Francisco during seemingly endless litigation with family members and squatters over title rights. Our spot became part of the Emeric ranch, owned by multimillionaire Henri Emeric. He built a grand estate a couple of blocks away at what is now the Salesian High School.

In 1895 the Emeric land holdings went on the market, and much of the land was sold to Portuguese immigrants from the Azores Islands. Many Azorean whalers had jumped ship in San Francisco during the Gold Rush and returned to the Bay Area to work on the ranches and save money to buy their own land. One of the foremen on the Emeric Ranch was Antonio Dutra Andrade, and he bought a large chunk of land, including our future garden space. I presume that ranching (dairy farming) continued as previously. More farms dotted the landscape; hay baling was a big business and sugar beet fields moved in. The arrival of train service made it possible to ship produce to neighboring cities. This was prime agricultural land.

In 1910 several property owners (including Andrade) subdivided their farmland and sold individual lots near the town of San Pablo for houses. Our future garden got its first separate entry in the real estate records: Lots 1 and 2, Block 18, Andrade Home Tract.

As far as we can tell nothing further happened until 1947 when the present house was built during the post World

War II housing boom. An old neighbor told us that the area was “all just weeds” or “fields of sugar beets”.

Standing here in the 1950'ies you see a small vegetable patch where the clothesline now is. Otherwise the space is open, and it is unfenced toward the street. The six kids living here are running around, having a good time — this is a big spacious playground. We find their lost marbles whenever we disturb the soil, leading to the tongue in cheek name for our place: “Marble Gardens”.

In 1967 Bill Cochran bought the place. He worked as a greengrocer in San Francisco and was by all accounts a very able vegetable gardener.

Imagine standing in a classic Victory vegetable garden. The yard is now one big vegetable plot with the rows running cross-wise, east to west. There are corn, tomatoes, onions, lots of squashes and beans on strings up against the garage. The back fence is covered with chayote vines, and the Mexicans in the neighborhood come by to get some of them. Bill always has a surplus of vegetables and fruit. He putters around in his garden at all times, often in the company of Tony, a neighbor with little garden space. Tony has a gate in the fence between the yards and comes in here to grow onions and hang out with Bill. It is clearly a loved and cherished garden place.

In the winter of 1997 Bill fell ill and could no longer live by himself. The property was weed-whacked (even the artichokes) and placed on the market.

In July of 1997 we saw the house on our first trip to the Richmond North and East. We did not want to move to Richmond, but our El Cerrito rental had just been put on the market, money was tight, and our real estate agent gently, but firmly, told us to take her list of houses and “just go look at them”. 3200 Moran was the last on the list, and as we drove up a metallic blue pipevine swallowtail butterfly was nectaring on the Lantana in front of a cream-colored house with blue trim. Since the house was clearly empty we went

into backyard — a gardener had surely lived here, we could still feel the rows under our feet. The apricot tree was golden with apricots, a surviving cream and burgundy Duet dahlia fabulous and the garden space empty, but full of promise.

The house would do.

Sold.

We moved in the house in early September 1997 and started on the garden that fall. Bill left us fabulous soil (every year he would improve the soil, already good, with organic amendment). I still remember when I watered the dry ground in what used to be his vegetable patch, and the fork slid in like a knife into butter. The soil came up dark and crumbly, and in my 20 years in the Bay Area I had never seen soil like it. I realized that we had unwittingly bought black gold. He also left us some plants like rhubarb, artichokes, an apricot tree and one apple (although why he planted a Red Delicious is beyond us since Emil Lindquist, the renowned expert on apples, lived and had his orchard across the street). Although neighbors tells us that Bill was not into ornamentals we have several plants he left behind: some very nice old style bearded irises and dahlias, Chinese ground orchid, Hydrangea, lots of love-in-the-mist, the Lantana loved by butterflies and the outrageous *Echium wildpretii*.

The rest was up to us. Much of it was hard work for a couple of middle-aged ladies: digging trenches for the water supply (somehow there was not a faucet in the main backyard), chopping down the juniper trees on 32nd St. and carrying heavy lumber for the raised beds.

Our most rewarding project on all levels has probably been restoring the parking strips on 32nd St. to a rough resemblance of the great bunchgrass prairie that used to be here.

Anni Jensen

Sources:

Stephen W. Edwards: "A Meditation on East Bay Natural History at First Contact." *Four Seasons* Vol. 10, no. 3

San Pablo Historical Society: *From a Rancho to a City Called San Pablo* (available at the Castro Adobe on San Pablo Avenue).

San Francisco Estuary Institute: *Wildcat Creek Watershed Landscape History*. Only available on the web at <http://www.sfei.org/HEP/wildcat/>

Neighbors