THREE GENERATIONS of GROCERS
David, Bob, Jim, Eugene and Doug Canepa
FROM THE PRESIDENT

The Mill Valley Historical Society is pleased to present our latest REVIEW magazine. This collection of stories highlights interesting and important contributions of Mill Valleyans who came before us and continue to shape our unique community today. The theme of family, and in particular the role that women have played, is strong in these stories—by no means a new topic, but a timely one, with the recent emergence of the #MeToo movement and the ongoing national debate it has sparked about social justice.

The talented writers and editor behind these stories drew extensively from primary materials, oral histories, interviews, original papers, and photographs—much of which was collected and made available through staff at the Mill Valley Public Library and volunteers with the Historical Society.

I continue to marvel at the tireless efforts of volunteers, city employees, and advocates who make this town run and keep it special. Here at the Historical Society, we are aiming to contribute to this collective effort by expanding on our existing programs and improving our outreach to the Mill Valley community. Working with staff at the library’s History Room, we are also creating new programs and projects that will appeal to children and young adults. We will keep you informed as we roll out these activities in the coming year. If you are not already a member of the Historical Society, I encourage you to join—an easy process via our website at www.mvhistory.org.

Thanks to the contributors to REVIEW, the volunteers who help bring the publication to life, and our advertisers, who believe in what we do. And of course, we would like to thank all of our members for their support.

Best regards,
Eric Macris

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Engine No. 9 in March 1921, just before leaving the Heisler factory in Erie, PA. On March 15, 2018, Friends of No. 9, LLC purchased this last surviving steam engine of Mt. Tamalpais. The consortium, comprised of the Mill Valley Historical Society, Friends of Mt. Tamalpais, the Marin History Museum, and several individuals, will fundraise then restore and bring the rare relic back to Marin County. Courtesy of Fred Runner.
This year Marin County is celebrating a groundbreaking anniversary for women. One century ago, on April 21, 1918, nearly 200 women gathered in downtown Mill Valley for the first annual women’s Dipsea Hike. The San Francisco Call newspaper, organizer of the first three of what would ultimately become a series of five hikes, would later call it “one of the most novel and unique competitive athletic events ever staged in which girls are the only contestants.”

Taking place once a year from 1918 through 1922, the Dipsea Hike or “Girls’ Hike” was a separate event from the distance race that is Marin’s most famous sporting event and the country’s oldest cross-country race. A 1904 bet between two hikers from the San Francisco Olympic Club on who would be the quickest to make it from the Mill Valley train station to the Dipsea Inn over at Willow Camp (now Stinson Beach) set the stage for what would officially become the Dipsea Race in 1905.

Until 1971, Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) rules banned women from officially entering distance races, so women could not be considered official Dipsea Race participants. A forward-thinking man named George James sought a way around the ban. A well-known athlete and erstwhile captain of the Olympic Club, James became a champion for women athletes, advocating for their participation in sports. In a 1918 issue of the club’s publication, Olympian, he stated, “I believe that a woman, equally trained, and in the same physical condition as a man, is more game, more tenacious, and has greater endurance.”

James’ “hike” was deliberately named to avoid the AAU ban, yet it was very much a race, and some competitors ran without restraint. Much detailed planning went into the event. Newspaper articles describe how James gathered professionals and businessmen from San Francisco, many of whom were Olympic Club members, to serve as committee members to supervise the hikes. Dozens served as assistant starters, aides de camp, judges, checkers, course marshals, and even medical directors, while others oversaw transportation, refreshments, and entertainment.

The hikes would follow the same roughly seven-mile course as the official Dipsea Race, with participants toeing the starting line in downtown Mill Valley and traversing the redwoods and grasslands of Mount Tamalpais before crossing the finish line at Willow Camp. There were notable differences, however, between the women’s and men’s races. The Dipsea Hike did not have a system of handicapping, which has been a hallmark of the Dipsea Race since its first year. Another difference, pointing to antiquated beliefs about women and their fragility, was that before hiking, each female contestant was required to submit to an examination of the heart. According to Call writer Frank P. Noon, “The examination may be made with or by a family physician or by three specialists who have volunteered to assist the Call in seeing that before a contestant started over the trail she be in the proper condition.”

Entry lists show that only three of the registrants for the first hike lived in Mill Valley: Elizabeth Agazelow, Helen R. Manning, and Grace P. Martin. The vast majority came from San Francisco, taking the 7:45 or 8:15 ferryboat to Sausalito, then jumping aboard a train to downtown Mill Valley in plenty of time for the 10 a.m. start. There was no fee to register, so transportation was the women’s only cost.

Photographs show starters gathered at the downtown Mill Valley start line attired in trousers and blouses, with caps or bandanas on their heads and lace-up boots or shoes. By contrast, photos from men’s races of the era show competitors dressed in a manner more conducive to racing—primarily sleeveless shirts and shorts. Yet for all their gear, 148 women crossed the finish line for the first race, with San Francisco resident Edith Hickman coming in victorious with a time of 1:18:48. A champion swimmer and hiking enthusiast, Hickman was well familiar with the Dipsea trail and quickly made her way to the head of the pack, besting her closest competitor, Vivian Black, by about a minute and a half. Hickman won a silver trophy from Mayor James Rolph Jr., along with a cup from the Call. In a later interview with reporter Alma Reed, Hickman provided tips such as eating a proper diet and getting plenty of sleep for would-be hike participants. Her most important advice: “Don’t underestimate the value of training.”
Upon arriving at the hike's end point in Willow Camp, each contestant was presented with two vouchers, one for luncheon and the other for an automobile ride back to Mill Valley.

The amount of organization and work behind the event was well appreciated by its participants. A letter housed in the Olympic Club archives and signed by nearly two dozen women, including the hike's winner, thanked George James for his “good fellowship and ability.” “You managed the start and finish, also many little comforts during the day for us in a way that could not possibly have been better. We only hope that you will have charge of the same kind of a race for us next year.”

Indeed, the Dipsea Hike continued on in 1919, with San Francisco resident Marion Mehl crossing the finish line with a time of 1:15:56. As the 10th place finisher in the Call's first hike, Mehl had been determined to win the following year. Heeding Hickman's advice, she began training well in advance. Entries and finishers for that second race dipped, but the following year, over 600 women registered for the hike. John J. Connolly, writing for a local newspaper, described the event as going “into history today as being the greatest record-breaking athletic event for women in the history of women's athletics in California.” The hike didn't just draw large numbers of participants; deputies from the Marin County Sheriff's Department had to hold back an estimated 5,000 spectators from crowding the finish line. Priscilla Swearingen was the first place finisher, besting the times of both Hickman and Mehl, at 1:14:44.

In 1921, San Francisco's Bulletin newspaper took over sponsorship from the Call. The champion of the final two hikes was one of Mill Valley's own, Emma Reiman, a resident of Dot's Lane. A stenographer and athlete, and runner-up of the 1919 and 1920 hikes, Reiman won in 1921 with a time of 1:16:15. She shaved off four minutes in 1922, closing out the last of the women's Dipsea Hikes with the best time of all, 1:12:06. The winner of the men's race that year finished in 58:10, just 14 minutes faster. “She ran swifter than 10 of the 71 finishers,” Barry Spitz writes in his book Dipsea: The Greatest Race.

Emma Reiman, winner of the 1921 and 1922 Dipsea Hikes. Her fastest time was a mere 14 minutes slower than the winning time of the men's Dipsea Race that year. Courtesy of the Lucretia Little History Room, Mill Valley Public Library.
igh on the windswept ridges of Mt. Tamalpais is a rustic gem from another time: a living, working gas-lit inn, built long ago when steam trains once climbed the mountain. Today, 114 years later, the primitive inn, a magnet to hikers, stands in a preserved wilderness at the edge of one of the largest and most technologically sophisticated urban centers of the world. Mt. Tamalpais has been enjoyed by hikers since the late 19th century, its contours becoming less formidable as more hikers came and new trails were developed.

In 1895, a handful of men had the courage to pool their capital and incorporate as the Mill Valley and Mount Tamalpais Scenic Railway. Other scenic railways in remote places were doing well: Pikes Peak in Colorado, Mount Lowe in Southern California, several in Switzerland, and the first-ever to be built, Mount Washington in New Hampshire. The tiny village of Mill Valley was unknown to most of the world and the idea that scenery could draw tens of thousands to ride a short rail line was optimistic, but Mt. Tam had great advantages. On other scenic railways the view at the end of the line was of more mountains. Brochures here described how much more could be seen from Mt. Tamalpais: San Francisco Bay, the great city itself, and a vast expanse of Pacific Ocean. On Mill Valley's mountain, one's travel dollar expanded with every turn of the Crookedest Railroad in the World.

Construction started in February 1896, beginning in the dirt streets of downtown Mill Valley and climbing to the mountain's East Peak. Shay 498 managed all the construction, and in six months the line was finished. It had been hard work, all of it by
hand using picks, shovels, wheelbarrows, blasting powder—essentially, the tools used to build the Transcontinental Railroad. Crews averaged about 200 men and at times swelled to 300, mostly European immigrants.

A strapping young engineer named Jake Johnson delivered the first steam engine to Mt. Tamalpais. Both Johnson and the engine were on loan from the Dollar Lumber Company on the Russian River. Jake liked working the mountain. He soon became a Scenic Railway employee and moved to Mill Valley.

The Mill Valley and Mount Tamalpais Scenic Railway was 8 ½ miles of twisting railroad climbing along the mountainside at an average rise of 5%. There were 281 turns and curves and 22 trestles. The engineering was exceptional. The inaugural run was a "thank you" train on August 22, 1896, a free ride for the citizens of Mill Valley in gratitude for enduring the noise, commotion, dust, and dirt of construction. Regular service began August 27, 1896.

OPPOSITE: For the first decade the West Point Inn had a small porch frequently visited by nattily dressed hikers (men with slacks and ties and women in dresses). This photo was taken from atop the stables used by the stagecoach that met the steam trains here every afternoon. About two years after this photo was taken, the porch was enlarged to its present size.

BELOW: In the early afternoon steam trains and their crews "laid over" at East Peak waiting for the next run down Mt. Tamalpais. This 1907 photo shows senior engineer Jake Johnson and fireman Roy Graves (right) with engine No. 5. The crew of engine No. 4 (at left) are unknown. Roy Graves Collection. Both photos courtesy of the Lucretia Little History Room, Mill Valley Public Library.

West Point was the westernmost point of the railroad, about three-quarters of the way up the mountain. Atop that narrow ridge, the rails made a tight 252° arc and pointed toward East Peak. In 1897, West Point became a tourist landmark and destination for some when the railroad announced passengers could stop there and hike the new West Point trail to Bolinas Ridge and on to Larson’s Summit House, which was a stop on the Bolinas-Fairfax stage road. At some point, the West Point trail was renamed the Rock Spring trail.

In the fall of 1902, new work began on a stage road from West Point to Willow Camp. Stage service, with a team of four horses, began the next year on May 1, 1903. It was an experiment to see if there was enough business to justify laying track and starting rail service to the popular but difficult-to-access beach at Willow Camp, today’s Stinson Beach.

At the January 1904 board meeting, Sidney B. Cushing, the president of the Scenic Railway, asked the directors to build a "depot at West Point." No doubt the lack of shelter in the baking summer sun or the storm-driven winds that could thrash that narrow ridge inspired the request. Cushing and his close friend and frequent business partner, William Kent, were travelers on this route. Both had purchased real estate between Willow Camp and Bolinas and they stood to benefit if the stage service became popular. By spring, the West Point depot was taking shape as an inn, though its construction was delayed by heavy winter rains. The railroad estimated the building’s cost at $2,500.
Shelter and Hospitality
The West Point Inn opened for business on September 3, 1904. A newspaper story in the Marin County Tocsin, the sole piece on the inn’s opening and earliest operations, indicates that the inn was leased by the railroad to the stage company. If true, Wallace Sayers, who ran the stage, leased the inn and found the first inn-keepers. The inn’s promotion was up to the stage company, and perhaps because passenger traffic to it was largely local, it was only lightly mentioned in the Scenic Railway’s brochures.

We don’t know the architect or builder of the West Point Inn, although aspects of it echo the railroad’s dance pavilion, built at East Peak in 1897. Both buildings were clad in shingles and had similar flourishes at the corners of the building. Their foundations used identical dry-stack masonry construction. Both buildings were unfazed by the jarring punch of the 1906 earthquake, its epicenter a short distance away on the San Andreas Fault.

Hikers quickly fell in love with the West Point Inn, a place of shelter and hospitality where there had been none. An oral history by early Mill Valley resident Hertha Meyer speaks of the inn’s early days: “At the small hotel I spent many happy vacations in all seasons of the year and could easily imagine myself in the Swiss Alps. For a long time this inn was conducted by a Swiss couple, John and Johanna Roth. A Swiss atmosphere prevailed, Mrs. Roth’s Swiss cookies always being very much in demand. “One large hall [known today as The Parlor] served as combination dining and living room, and proved quite adequate as the days of most of the guests were spent on the mountain trails. The bedrooms were very small, each being furnished with a bed, one chair, a washstand and a few pegs for clothes. But the superb outlook upon wooded valleys, San Francisco Bay and the Pacific Ocean from the inn’s windows fully compensated the lack of luxuries and West Point was a very popular resort.” Those small rooms remain unchanged to this day.

In 1907, the Scenic Railway opened a new branch into Redwood Canyon. In 1908, the canyon was renamed Muir Woods when Teddy Roosevelt signed the proclamation creating the nation’s 10th National Monument. That summer, the Muir Inn was built with a lobby, restaurant, and bar. Guests, including John Muir himself in 1909, spent the night in outlying cabins.

About this time, cabins began to appear at West Point, with similar one-wall wooden construction and features common to the cabins at Muir Woods. Perched high on a Tamalpais hillside, West Point’s cabins had the better view.

By 1915, stage service had slowed and some time that summer the service ended. Business at the West Point Inn dropped off. Twice that year, once in the summer and again in the fall, the Scenic Railway ran ads to sell the inn for $700. There were no takers. Innkeepers Bob and Nora Stanton ran the place until the end of the tourist season. On November 1 they moved out, locked the inn, and returned to San Francisco.

The following year, members of the new Tamalpais Conservation Club (TCC), a hiking and conservation organization, convinced the railroad to reopen and improve the inn with a focus on hiking. The most notable improvement was expanding the small porch to the size it is today, a design by TCC member and architect Henry Boese. This was also the beginning of work parties, where volunteers gave time on the “Saturday with the fullest moon” to maintain the inn. When work was done, volunteers could enjoy dinner and stay the night with like-minded friends.

The new porch was finished in March. The inn reopened April 8, 1916, with a celebratory barbecue prepared by cooks from The Tavern at East Peak, sent by the railroad company. The inn swarmed with hikers, and gravity cars stood by to take the overflow down to Mill Valley at the end of the night.

For many years to come, West Point innkeepers were TCC members. The inn was the club’s mountain headquarters, a place to pay dues and conduct other club business.
By 1916, the Mountain Play was three years old, producing one show each May. Of course the play was a big deal, and the inn was an important landmark for playgoers. While many hiked great distances to the play, others who were less athletic took the train to the West Point stop and hiked from there. On Saturday of Mountain Play weekend, the lead actors and director would arrive at the inn, drop their things, and go to the Mountain Theater to rehearse, returning that night for a lively dinner full of theatrics. In the morning, the company would have breakfast and head to the amphitheater for another rehearsal. As they departed, the first audience members arrived on the train and the innkeepers took orders for fresh chicken dinners. In the days before refrigeration, there were lots of chickens running around the inn, supplying eggs for breakfast and chicken for dinner.

At the end of the performance, the audience streamed from the theater. Those who had made reservations dined at the inn, while others trekked down the hill or boarded the train. Diners could take the last train down the mountain at 8:45 p.m.

**The Dodge Cabin**

In 1918, the last cabin built for a very long time was by Dr. Washington Dodge, a survivor of the R.M.S. *Titanic*. Dodge's story about surviving in Lifeboat 13 is amazing. He was pushed into the lifeboat by his dining room steward, Fredrick Dent Ray, who explained later that they needed men to man the oars, and having a doctor in the drifting lifeboats would be a good idea.

It’s not known how Dodge came to build a cabin at West Point. He traveled in influential circles and personally must have known some of the railroad management. He had hiked Mt. Tamalpais in the 1890s and later became a generous member of the TCC. Dodge had not practiced medicine for years; he gave it up in 1896 when he became a successful San Francisco politician. Shortly after his return from the Titanic in 1912, he became a banker. A TCC newsletter said he was a “frequent visitor” to the cabin in 1918. It would have been a refuge out of the city and away from the flu epidemic that was killing millions around the world.

Today, Dodge’s cabin is known as the Honeymoon Cabin, probably because for decades it was the finest accommodation, with the most amenities, of anything at the inn.

**The Kliewes**

In 1919, the Kliewe family became innkeepers at the West Point Inn. They are perhaps the best-documented innkeepers and the first with children. Young Ralph, four when the family arrived, made friends with all the train crews. Room 2 was his room; his parents, like all early innkeepers, stayed in Room 1.

Martin Kliewe (pronounced Klee-way) had worked at some of the finer hotels in San Francisco, including the St. Francis. TCC newsletters said he “transformed the Inn.” Indeed, he covered the tables with linen and silver and arranged sprigs of fern in cut-glass vases. He was enterprising, selling eggs, chickens, and turkeys from the inn. He built custom radio receivers in the pantry at the dawn of tube radio technology and sold those, too. He was also a deputy sheriff for Mt. Tamalpais. He was photographed on horseback wearing a six-point star with a rifle hanging from his saddle.

In 1920, a new dining room (today’s Members Lounge) was added to the inn. In that room, one of Kliewe’s radios played music at dinner each night. From the finest hotels, San Francisco’s most popular bands were heard live at dinner, and after dinner the guests danced in the middle of the new room.

**Hikers Save the Day**

In 1930, the railroad was abandoned. Ridgecrest Boulevard made it possible to drive to Tamalpais’ East Peak in 1925. Automobiles, buses, and taxis were more sexy than steam engines and very quickly the railroad began losing money.

West Point Inn’s future was unsure as the scrapping crew began ripping the rails from Mt. Tamalpais. In September 1930, the crew was working near West Point as senior engineer Jake Johnson marked his 71st birthday. He had worked the entire 34-year run of the Scenic Railway. Now he was scrapping it.

Luckily for the inn, hikers from the many groups who enjoyed the mountain each weekend—Tamalpais Conservation Club, Alpine Club, Cross County Boys Club, Tourist Club, Contra Costa Hills Club, and others—came through again.

The number of hikers on Mt. Tamalpais had grown tremendously. Every weekend they came by the thousands. That kept the inn open during the Depression. TCC newsletters encouraged members to patronize the inn. In 1938, a TCC-published brochure, “The Hikers Guide,” told of routes all over the mountain. On a typical Sunday the brochure advised those who liked to hike but didn’t want to hike alone to come to the Ferry Building between 8:00 and 8:15 a.m. Volunteer hike leaders were there, each with a colored sign. The colors corresponded to the hikes described in the brochure. At 8:15 the ferry (often the Eureka, with a capacity of...
3,300 and usually packed) backed out of the Northwestern Pacific ferry slip and sailed for Sausalito.

Upon docking, waiting trains would carry hikers to Mill Valley or San Anselmo-Fairfax. All converged on Mill Valley at the end of the day, where waiting trains typically held 500. People would walk down the length of the trains, spot someone they had not seen in a while and strike up a conversation. Sometimes they would try to wriggle up through an open window to sit next to a friend; the vestibules at either end of the cars were usually jammed. The trains took off for Sausalito, where they met a ferryboat. People flowed onto the boats. Drinks could be enjoyed and songs sung.

This happened every weekend, starting in the 1910s. It slowed when the Golden Gate Bridge opened in 1937. When train service ended in Mill Valley in September 1940, the hiking community faded. World War II only made it worse.

The West Point Inn felt all those changes. The Deans, who started running the inn in 1939, enjoyed entertaining hikers and the Army when they came to Mt. Tamalpais in 1941. But as visitors dwindled, the Deans had to dig into their personal savings to keep the inn open. By the end of 1942, they couldn't manage it anymore.

San Francisco News columnist Ethel Bogardus, a regular visitor to the inn, wrote: “The West Point Inn is about to close its doors. This seems to me a major calamity, for although the modest hospitality perched on a friendly shoulder of Mount Tamalpais may not enjoy a worldwide fame, it is my favorite.

“When January bows out, the Deans will close the hospitable doors, lower the Flag for the last time and close up shop for good. No more coffee in the sun on the porch, no more good dinners from the big oil stove. When you can’t get food [war rationing was in force] you can’t feed people, so what’s the use trying. The West Point Inn is going the way of the ‘crookedest railway’ and many of us are sad for its passing.”

Mt. Tamalpais and Muir Woods Railroad crew about to tear up the mountain railroad track, 1930. Courtesy of the Lucretia Little History Room, Mill Valley Public Library.

Without the active support of hikers, the West Point Inn would not have survived. This 1923 photo shows the Reeves family and friends hiking on the mountain. Elsa Reeves, age 13, is at left, holding the dog. Nancy Skinner Collection, courtesy of the Lucretia Little History Room, Mill Valley Public Library.

The Marin Municipal Water District (MMWD), the inn’s landlord since about 1932, considered burning the empty inn as a “liability and fire hazard.”

Again, the hikers came to the rescue. In March 1943, when the outcome of World War II was far from certain and the entire country was working around the clock to win the war, a group of hikers found the time to keep the inn going.

At first it looked like the Sierra Club could take over management, but that didn’t work because their charter would not allow them to manage property. Then Frank Bradley, with the help of fellow hikers, volunteers from the San Francisco News staff, and others, created a corporation called the West Point Club. They bought the inn’s furnishings, sold membership shares, and signed a lease with the MMWD for one dollar per year.

Said Bradley, “We want to preserve the West Point Inn so the future generation will know the pleasures we knew on the mountain.”

The West Point Club hired Al Dhume as caretaker so the inn would not be empty during the week, a Water District requirement. Club members believed that when the war was over the inn could be run as a commercial enterprise again. But they were wrong. At the end of the war America had changed. People were no longer hiking; they were driving and discovering where roads would take them.

A whole raft of challenges lay ahead for the West Point Inn, both legal and practical. But the groundwork had been laid in the 1940s for a volunteer-run, publicly owned place where anyone could enjoy a rare taste of authentic living history, not something manufactured. As it always had, the inn inspired the best in people from all walks of life to give up their time, to volunteer, and to come great distances to clean the windows, mop the floor, paint wood, and fix the quirky old pieces of an aging structure. This last vestige of a vanished era would not survive without them.
In its own way, the West Point Inn says “thank you” every time someone comes through the front door and sees the fire crackling in the old stone fireplace, or sits on the porch to watch an orange sunset highlight the clouds and the buildings of San Francisco. No other place offers that special hospitality.

Fred Runner has been the historian of the West Point Inn and the Mill Valley and Mt. Tamalpais Scenic Railway for over 20 years. Professionally, he is a motion picture sound mixer, recording dialogue for all kinds of movies.

West Point Inn, 2016. Because of its remote location away from regular roads and highways, finding the inn requires some adventure in your soul. After decades of just getting by, the inn is now thriving, discovered by a much larger audience via the internet. Increased usage has brought more income and allowed for restoration work. The trees that surround the building were planted as part of a hiker beautification project in the 1930s. Courtesy of the Lucretia Little History Room, Mill Valley Public Library.

### Hiking to West Point

We moved to Mill Valley in 1962 and began hiking immediately with our youngsters aged two, three and a half, and five, first on fire trails near our home, and a year later on Mt. Tamalpais. Barry Spitz hadn’t written his mountain guidebook yet, so our goals were hiking, picnicking, and discovering what was on the way. In this manner we “discovered” the concrete platform of Mesa Station on the mountain railway, the Austrian Tourist Club above Muir Woods, and much to our delighted surprise, the West Point Inn, with its picnic tables on the deck and fabulous views.

We discovered the inn on a hike beginning at Mountain Home Inn, climbing the Hogback to the north past three wooden water-tower tanks and taking a left (to the west) at the trail sign for Bootjack, which put us on the Matt Davis Trail. We branched off to the right at the steep Nora Trail (from 1,360 feet to 1,780 feet) up to West Point. Completed in 1917, the trail, a shortcut from Mountain Home Inn, was named for Nora Stanton, the West Point innkeeper with her husband, Bob.

If you’re lucky, you will find an existing, unmarked trail that also leads to the West Point Inn and is not as steep as the Nora Trail. Later, we found an easier way: starting from Pantoll on the Old Stage Road, a much more gentle hike to the east of 1.83 miles with an elevation gain of just 285 feet. Old Stage Road is little changed since stagecoaches traveled this route, and is especially beautiful at twilight. The same walk after dark is illegal, even though ambient light from San Francisco is enough to light most of the way.

You can also reach West Point Inn from Rock Spring. This route takes you to the Cushing Memorial Amphitheater, and if you stay at the top row of theater seats, it is a nearly level hike east over to West Point Inn for a total of 1.7 miles. Alternatively, from Bootjack climb up to the Matt Davis Trail, then take a right turn for West Point Inn. This is our least favorite route because of the yellow jackets hovering around the picnic tables at Bootjack.

One of the most delightful and authentic ways to reach the West Point Inn is to start near the western end of Blithedale Avenue in Mill Valley and take the Old Railroad Grade. It’s a gradual climb of 5.3 miles, with an elevation gain of approximately 1,556 feet.

Two of our adult children still visit the mountain regularly on their road bikes, cycling from Mill Valley to Stinson Beach and returning on the Bolinas-Fairfax road, for a 35-mile round trip.

For a full description of all these trails, read Barry Spitz’s book Tamalpais Trails.

Betty Goerke is the author of Chief Marin and A Broken Propeller. Thanks to Curt Oldenburg and Fred Runner for their contributions.
MILL VALLEY’S MUSLIM COMMUNITY

Mill Valley is home to a community of Muslims of Indian origin who trace their ancestral roots to the village of Rander, a 2,500-year-old Indian settlement in the Surat District, state of Gujarat. Virtually all are related by blood or marriage. They range in age from infants to nonagenarians, and live near one another. The adults are professionals, blue-collar workers, business owners, students, and retirees. Many are multi-lingual, speaking English, Gujarati, and Urdu-Hindi, able to read the poetic Arabic of the holy Koran (Qur’an). Their lives revolve around education, work, faith, and family.

In 1977, Ebrahim and Shahida Nana were the first to settle in Mill Valley. Ebrahim is one of the principal founders of the Islamic Center of Mill Valley and president of Nana Wall Systems, Inc., in Corte Madera. In 2016, he recorded an oral history for the Lucretia Little History Room, interviewed by Debra Schwartz, a member of the Mill Valley Historical Society board. His history details his early life here; his entrepreneurial ventures, the founding of the mosque; some beliefs and practices of Islam; and the general support his community has received from Mill Valley residents. The transcript also reveals a few of the painful difficulties he experienced over a decade after a young member of the Islamic Center, John Walker Lindh, was arrested in Afghanistan in 2001.

Ebrahim first came to my notice at an ecumenical rally outside Tamalpais High School soon after the terrorist attacks of September 11th. He shared his community’s outrage, shock, and sorrow, and his message of peace comforted many minds and hearts that day.

Ebrahim Nana and the Hi-Ho Motel

Born in 1951 in Mumbai, India, Ebrahim Nana grew up in Bangkok, where his transnational Indian family of traders has lived for two centuries. In 1969, at age 18, he came to U.C. Berkeley to study industrial engineering. After receiving his undergraduate degree, he obtained a master’s degree at Stanford. Returning to Thailand, he married, went to work for the British-Dutch multi-international firm, Lever Brothers, and joined the exclusive Royal Bangkok Sports Club. It was a privileged life and he had no thoughts of returning to the United States.

However, at the same time, his father was investing in the Bay Area. In 1976 he purchased the Hi-Ho Motel at 707 Redwood Highway, Mill Valley, arranging for a relative in San Francisco to manage it. When the arrangement fell through, Ebrahim’s father prevailed upon him, the oldest son and the one with a green card, to take over. Regrettfully leaving their life in Thailand, Ebrahim and his bride, Shahida, dutifully moved here in 1977. For the next 20 years they lived in the motel. Ozair, a younger brother of Ebrahim’s, soon joined them (eventually, all four Nana brothers moved here). Entrepreneurial ventures were developed and real estate investments were made. Some succeeded well and some failed badly. Ebrahim and Shahida had four children. It had taken time to raise the cash to build their home on Seaver Drive because Muslim precepts advise against paying or charging interest. One by one, the Nanas applied for family members to join them in Mill Valley, where the process to become American citizens began. All feel lucky to be in such a beautiful place as Marin County, close to nature, in a temperate climate.

BY ABBY WASSERMAN
Happens and now I was looked at as a hostile person. Before, I was shy and timid, to me and says, ‘Why did you do this?’ I was fine a couple of hours ago, and 9/11. Teachers are crying at school, it’s uncomfortable. Then at recess a boy comes up to affect me? It’s New York, we’re in Mill Valley. But it changed my life trajectory. Towers are down and they’re saying Muslims did it.’ I thought, how is this going everything was good. On the day of 9/11 my mother wakes me up and says, ‘The twin towers are down and they’re saying Muslims did it.’ I thought, how is this going to happen? It’s New York, we’re in Mill Valley. But it changed my life trajectory. Before, I was shy and timid, but after, people walked on eggshells around me. There was a fear about all Muslims.

Khadija Hansia: We’re All Human Beings

Khadija Hansia, 29, balances a creative, high-powered career as a wedding planner (Limelight Productions) with outreach work for the mosque and charitable activism. Muslims must donate a percentage of their wealth to Muslim charities every year. Usually this is done through organizations, but Khadija’s work is also personal. She has traveled to sprawling refugee camps for Syrians in Turkey and to Bangladesh, where hundreds of persecuted Rohingya people have found temporary shelter, to distribute money and goods. Her sister, Fatima, 26, has traveled with her. Both sisters are adventurous. Fatima is presently in Barranquilla, Colombia, teaching English for six months. Khadija’s twin brother recently married, but the sisters are single, a break with Indian tradition, which encourages early marriages.

“My parents were married 10 years before having us, so they were very protective,” Khadija says of her youth. “After school my mom was always outside the school waiting for us. We followed everything the adults around us did. We saw our parents fold their hands in prayer; my father took me to the mosque; we prayed five times a day. At Ramadan (the annual month of fasting between dawn and dark) when we were five years old, my brother and I used to beg my parents not to feed us. They told us it was important to eat; in Islam, fasting is not asked for until puberty. They trained us for what Islam was all about. They enrolled us in the after-school class at the mosque taught by the imam, Yunus, and his wife, Aisha. We learned to read Arabic. They taught us the prayers and the Sunnahs—the way the Prophet ate, drank, slept. We grew up learning about all those things.

“I never saw myself as different from any other children here. I had been with them all my life. Then in the sixth grade at Mill Valley Middle, one day we were supposed to make a self-portrait. Because everyone around me was white, I thought I was white. I picked up the peach-colored pencil to color my face, and my friend said that wasn’t the right color and she put a brown-colored pencil against my hand. The color matched. I had the first realization that I was different. I think it was how people see you. I was a little confused. It was an epiphany happening to an 11-year-old: I look different? I can’t use the same pencil? The color of your skin dictates how people see you, when we’re all human beings!

“I had just started eighth grade when September 11, 2001, happened. Before that, everything was good. On the day of 9/11 my mother wakes me up and says, ‘The twin towers are down and they’re saying Muslims did it.’ I thought, how is this going to affect me? It’s New York, we’re in Mill Valley. But it changed my life trajectory. Teachers are crying at school, it’s uncomfortable. Then at recess a boy comes up to me and says, ‘Why did you do this?’ I was fine a couple of hours ago, and 9/11 happens and now I was looked at as a hostile person. Before, I was shy and timid,

Obervant Muslims pray five times a day, and for many years there was no mosque in Mill Valley. Ebrahim opened up a room at the motel (soon affiliated with TraveLodge) for prayer so that observant individuals, amidst the pressures of daily life, could reconnect with God. In 1991, while Ebrahim was on a pilgrimage (Hajj) to Mecca, a building on Shell Road owned by the Baptist Theological Seminary in Strawberry came up for sale. Purchased by a Muslim buyer who remains anonymous, it was remodeled as a mosque (“masjid” in Arabic) and inaugurated as the Islamic Center of Mill Valley. Today it fits comfortably into the neighborhood. There is a large, sun-illuminated room where men and boys pray; a smaller room for women and girls’ prayer; a kitchenette for visiting Muslims; an ablutions area for ritual washing; a room for children’s Sunday School classes; storerooms packed with books; a patio for parties and the annual open houses for the neighbors; and a parking area/play yard with portable basketball hoops. The imam, Yunus Sayeed, has been there for 26 years. Ebrahim is in the mosque’s advisory board and his oldest son, Abdullah, and Abdullah’s wife, Asia, are active, as is Khadija Hansia, Abdullah’s cousin and Ebrahim’s niece.

Mill Valley boys Yaseen (center), Moosa, and Umair in front of the Islamic Center, 2018.
sexualized in American culture, but if you cover, you’re looked at for your intellect. Islam gives you that perspective.

“I don’t wear it now, except at the mosque and religious occasions, but I wore hijab throughout high school. I got a lot of questions: ‘Do you wear it in the shower?’ You’re visibly seen as a Muslim because of hijab. In high school, good character is half of one’s faith. I decided to implement that. Open a door for someone. Be kind. I thought if I did a lot of positive actions wearing hijab, people might make the connection that Muslims are good people. Then at College of Marin my second semester, waiting for a political science class to begin, I heard a woman saying, ‘I won’t get on a plane with her.’ I looked up and everyone in class was looking at me. The woman said, ‘She could have a bomb in her scarf and she could blow us all up.’ I was 18, I didn’t understand why she hated me. As a Muslim you’re supposed to save lives. This woman had never looked at me, never talked to me. I started crying and left the class.

“I was showing people about Islam but I realized then I had to start talking about Islam. I started the Interfaith Club at College of Marin, and then at S.F. State I asked my uncle Ebrahim if I could start making the mosque more active, because it was stagnant. We started doing interfaith work. I did an event asking the neighbors of the mosque to come in. After 9/11 people kept sending in mail supporting us and we invited them all in. Then the Marin Interfaith Council came. Carol Hovis, the council’s executive director, said they’d love to have me on the board. I was 25 or 26 at the time. I said sure. It’s opened up a lot of opportunities. Synagogues, churches, universities ask for a speaker. I speak at their main events, at interfaith breakfasts. Now the Islamic Center partners with schools, with Canal Alliance. We like to support the quality we are all craving now.”

The ensuing years after 9/11, though hard on Marin County’s Muslims, appear to have softened harsh stereotypes. “The interfaith community in Marin is extremely supportive of one another,” Fatima says, “especially the Jewish Community Center, as well as the majority of people. The Mill Valley masjid has been overwhelmed with positive messages of solidarity, hope, cards, and flowers in the wake of rising Islamophobia under our president. There is a beautiful sign glued on a friendly neighborhood street in Mill Valley I often pass that reads, ‘All Members of Our Community Are Welcomed.’ Acts of love like these declare testament that transformational change is possible.”

Safura Nana: A State of Modesty

Safura Nana, 18, is a senior at Tamalpais High School. She is the only daughter of Ozair and Bilkis Nana and the youngest of her generation of cousins. Her brothers are Zulkifl, 27; Imran, 24; and Daawood, 19. Safura is a modern young woman, well spoken and forthright. She leaves her hair uncovered and dresses in Western clothes. The spirit of hijab, she explains, is far more than a physical covering on someone’s head. “Hijab is actually a state of modesty that’s supposed to be practiced by both men and women,” she says. For her, this means long sleeves in public, and when she plays soccer she wears leggings under her shorts (a common practice among non-Muslim college basketball players, both men and women).

Young Muslim women are discouraged from dating, and Safura has no problem with this. She observes the trouble that early sexual activity, often fueled by alcohol, can cause to her high school peers. “People kind of know I’m off limits because I’m not in the social scene where guys would ask me out, so they understand. I have had guys hint at it, and I just start talking about religion, and that weirds them out,” she says. “Americans don’t like to talk about religion.”

The desire to be appreciated not for one’s beauty or physical form, but for one’s intellect, is a strong theme among Muslim women. One interviewee lauded traditional Muslim dress as “gender neutral.” It is also an identifier, proclaiming a woman as Muslim, and also honors the appeal of traditional dress such as shalwar kameez, a two-piece ensemble worn in India and Pakistan.

Safura practices her religion by praying “or trying to pray” five times a day. No drinking, no drugs, and she eats only halal foods, avoiding pork and other foods proscribed by the faith (vegan restaurants and kosher meats are popular among observant Muslims). She seldom goes to teenage parties, but doesn’t feel the loss because there are many family parties to enjoy. “We get...
together every Friday night,” she says. “We go to my grandpa’s, two people cook, we have dessert. We play Family Jeopardy, card games, kids’ chas- ing games. That’s very common with Muslim families.” Sports are prominent in the Nana clan. Safura has played many seasons of soccer throughout her school years as well as running track and softball. Other interests are art—she used to like to paint but “I didn’t think I was good at it”—hiking (“the Dipsea’s great”), and reading about the struggle of other people “to be aware and to be thankful for what I have.” For this interest she credits her cousin Khadija.

Most of her friends at Tam High are Muslim but she has other friends too, generally those who express an interest in learning about Islam; she likes the debate. “One boy asked a question that shocked me: ‘Why do you do good things?’ I said, ‘I do good things for my own good and for God.’ He said, ‘That means you’re only doing good for yourself. You do good to make yourself feel better about yourself.’” Safura counters, “I believe all religions teach us good. Our mission is just to do good in the world and that’s how we are like any other person.”

The morning after Donald Trump’s election— after a campaign rife with anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant rhetoric—Safura and a non-Muslim friend decided to leave class as a protest. They told as many people as they could, and walked out of sixth period, heading up Miller Avenue toward Mill Valley City Hall. “We chanted about how everyone’s welcome. We were joined by about 40 other students who talked of their per- sonal concerns about a president who simply did not want us here. It was a very powerful message that helped me realize how supportive the Mill Valley community was to Muslims.

“Then my social studies teacher said, ‘You should have a place for Muslims that’s safe.’ My friends and I set up the Muslim Students Association. We’ve met a lot of really cool people. Some come because they don’t have a place to eat lunch. One girl I thought just wanted to learn more, but it turned out she’s Bosnian Muslim on her father’s side. It was cool because most of my friends are Indian Muslim. We’ve been really good friends since. We’re not from the same culture but we can connect over something. We can talk about religion for so long—same ideas, same values.

“Some people think I’m only religious because my parents are. They think when I’m older I’ll feel different. If I’m fasting [during Ramadan], they think I’m only doing it to make my parents happy. No, that’s not the way it works. There are times when people make you question it, but my faith gives me peace, knowing there’s a higher power. You’re always able to come back when you’re stressed because you know that religion is waiting for you.”

Safura has applied to four University of California campuses for college. She wants to remain close to her family, and she knows that at a U.C. campus she will find other Muslim students with whom to connect.

### Hawa Baporia: The Dignity of Covering

Hawa Baporia, 28, arrived at the Mill Valley Public Library History Room in an immaculate black jilbāb (long, loose robe-like garment), an elegantly draped hijab covering her hair, forehead, and neck, and a black niqab (veil). Only her large, expressive eyes and delicate hands were uncovered. Among Muslims in Marin County, Hawa is one of a few who fully cover in public. At home, with other women, and with closest male family members, she does not. Covering for Muslim women in Western society is a matter of choice. It can be as simple as wearing long sleeves or leggings, a head scarf, loose robe-like garments, or a veil. Inside the mosque most women and men cover at least partially. Men and older boys wear a long traditional robe or caftan and a close-fitting cap. All shoes must come off before entering.

As soon as Hawa and I sat down in a private meeting room for our interview, she detached her veil, revealing a beautiful and animated face.

Hawa bibi (a term of respect for Muslim women in Southeast Asia) was born and raised in London. Her decision to cover in public is “an inherent part of me. It tells people that I am a proud Muslim and that I am not willing to be objectified. As much as people may think covering is a way to oppress a woman, I consider it dignifying. Back in London, many people choose to wear their faith on their sleeve. The Sikhs wear turbans, orthodox Jews wear their traditional attire, and we Muslims wear ours, amongst many others [who exhibit] their values by their clothing.”

Ten years ago, when her husband, Mill Valley-raised Ahmed Baporia, brought his new bride here, she was anxious about how Americans might react to her clothing. In contrast, she says, “I felt welcomed. People were not hesitant to greet me, and would simply ask questions if they were curious. I know this isn’t the case in all places. Mill Valley is special, and so is Marin as a whole. I certainly have expe- rienced some intolerance elsewhere in the form of derogatory remarks, but they barely affect me, as I believe in my choices, both in clothing and otherwise.”

Transportation was a bigger hurdle, she says. There’s excellent public transport in London, and she had never learned how to drive. “Ahmed had to take me every- where at first,” she recalls. She learned to drive, got her license, and was able again to move around freely and independently.

Hawa loved Mill Valley right away. “I found it hard to believe that this beautiful place was my new home,” she says. “I couldn’t get enough of the mountains and lush greenery all around. It was spacious and calm, unlike the busy, narrow roads of London. I also found the people here to be liberal and friendly.” She became an American citizen in 2016.
Ahmed Baporia’s family, like Hawa’s, has its roots in Rander, India, and the couple’s parents knew each other. After meeting twice, once in London and once in Mecca when the families were on pilgrimage, Hawa and Ahmed were not well acquainted, but veil or not, he was smitten. He urged his mother to send a proposal to Hawa’s family. The choice to accept was Hawa’s. “It’s always by choice,” she says. “We try not to deal with marriage on our own. Instead, we involve the families for good counsel, opinions, and prayers. Most of the marriages I know are really successful. You like each other, you meet the parents. The Prophet taught that love comes after marriage. We believe that if you do it the right way, God blesses the marriage.”

Their 2007 civil wedding in London was followed by three days of celebration: the formal ceremony (nikah), an intimate dinner party with close family from both sides—“probably 150 people but still considered ‘just close family’ for Indians,” Hawa says with a smile—followed the next day by a wedding feast hosted by her parents and finally a party hosted by Ahmed’s parents. The Baporias have two lively girls, seven and eight, and a mischievous boy of four. At least once a week they dine at Ahmed’s parents’ home in Mill Valley where their children, the only grandkids, are the joyful center of attention. After graduating from U.C. Berkeley, Ahmed studied with Ebrahim’s son Abdullah for five years, then went to India to specialize in Islamic finance, a complex field with many rules governing investments and banking. Hawa—who had studied Qur’anic sciences and the traditions of the Prophet at a school in the north of England before her marriage, as well as English language and literature, Arabic, and social studies—teaches a class on the Qur’an for women and gives advice to girls who are trying to reconcile Islamic teachings with American social norms. Besides her native English fluency, she speaks Gujarati and Urdu and understands Arabic.

When asked why women are separated from men at prayer, Hawa explains it as a practical matter. In practice, women don’t attend the mosque much except for weddings, funerals, and special occasions. They are not required to pray there, whereas men are required to do so as much as possible. “The rules are perfectly in women’s favor,” Hawa says. “For every step the man takes toward the mosque, the women secure an equal measure of reward praying at home. I’m fortunate that it works that way because the thought of taking the entire family to the mosque five times a day seems very impractical and difficult.”

In her spare time, Hawa loves to bake, especially cakes, which she decorates elaborately. She is teaching her children Arabic and keeps them busy with artwork, reading, and play. They are never bored, she says, but are always involved in projects. The only cloud in her life is when they travel. She is always taken aside to be searched; it is a familiar indignity for many in her family.

Asma Baporia: Holding on to the Culture | Asma Baporia, Hawa’s mother-in-law, and her husband, Mahmood, are first cousins to the Nanas. They have lived in Mill Valley for 31 years. Asma, 51, was born in Rangoon, Burma, and grew up in Mumbai. Mahmood’s family came to Mill Valley in 1978. He graduated from Tam High and studied civil engineering at U.C. Irvine. Asma and Mahmood met in person for the first time not long before their wedding.

“We were engaged for two years,” Asma explains. “During those two years we were corresponding by letters while he was finishing his engineering studies and I finished college in India. I was 19 when I got married.” Yes, she says, there was instant chemistry upon meeting. In September of 2018 they will be married 34 years. Asma is lovely in her hijab and burqa. She resembles her daughter-in-law Hawa—similar delicacy of features and large, expressive eyes. She communicates mindfulness and goodwill.

In 1987, Asma and Mahmood moved to Mill Valley with their two small sons, Usman and Ahmed, to be near Mahmood’s parents. The adjustment, coming from three years in India, was not easy. “We had to do everything by ourselves, which was difficult, because in India it’s quite affordable even if you don’t have a high standard of living to hire help for household chores,” Asma says. “But being here was good for raising kids. We lived with my husband’s parents for our first three years, then my parents immigrated from India in 2000 after I applied for them to come here. None of my siblings were still living in Mumbai and we didn’t want our parents to be alone.” Her parents live in Mill Valley now; her father is 92 and her mother is 81.

“It was mostly by choice that we all settled close by to each other,” Asma says. “To hold onto the faith, we have to hold onto the culture, too. Being around other Muslims, our kids have friends of all different age groups that share their values. If children have to go to prayers and eat halal food, and they’re all doing it together, then it’s easy to do it. If all my son’s friends were going to bars and parties, he would be more inclined to go with them. If he has other friends that don’t do those things, he is less inclined. We think if the home environment is solid, if they can ask questions and are supported at home, our kids will fall into the right way. We have kept our kids a little sheltered, and mostly we have prayed and gotten help from our community in raising them well. Luckily, everything has worked out.”

After Tam High, her son Usman went to S.F. State, then to London to get his
master’s degree in international marketing. For her daughters, Ayesha and Hafsa, Asma selected independent study programs at alternative schools. Both girls started college courses during high school, attended College of Marin, and transferred to four-year colleges. Ayesha studied interior design and architecture at S.F. State, and Hafsa, the youngest, is currently majoring in microbial biology at U.C. Berkeley.

Asma’s favorite pastimes are gathering her family together and reading—newspapers, magazines, books ranging from fiction to nonfiction to mysteries. “I get a book, I’m happy,” she says. “When my kids were growing up, we visited the Mill Valley Library once a week and they would check out as many books as they liked. Sometimes they would come home with up to 15 books each. This was a great way for them to spend their time, as we didn’t have a TV in the house and still don’t.”

Islam demands a good deal of its adherents. As Ebrahim Nana remarked to Debra Schwartz during his oral history interview in 2016, “Islam is very, very categorical in many things. Everything in life falls into one of five categories: There are things you’ve got to do as Muslims. There are things you absolutely cannot do. There are things recommended you do. Things recommended you don’t do. There are things where Islam doesn’t care. In every aspect of life Islam has a recommendation.” Intermediaries and interpreters are therefore important. Ebrahim’s oldest son, Abdullah, born and raised in Mill Valley, is a mufti, a scholar who has studied Islamic law and is qualified to give rulings and interpretations. Abdullah now lives in the East Bay with his wife, Asia, and their children. They come to Mill Valley every weekend to help out at the Islamic Center.

The rigor of Islam is softened by much beauty: The exquisite poetry of the Qur’an, which for Muslims is the direct word of Allah. The music of the Arabic words. The grace of Moorish calligraphy and architecture. The beauty of fabrics and flowing vestments. The joy of being close to family. The excitement of engaging with meaningful questions. The beauty of sharing with others. And there are challenges: will the young generation cleave to our beliefs or be lost in America? This is the question every immigrant parent must face at some time. The Indian Muslim community in Mill Valley has constructed a strong foundation for their children, who will decide what they will build for themselves in the future.

On the eve of her third pilgrimage to Mecca, Khadija Hansia reflected, “In college I thought, I’m Muslim, but I hadn’t questioned why I was. I started reading the Bible, the Torah, the Qur’an. There are so many similarities between them it’s ridiculous. In 2012, I wanted to go to Hajj to reaffirm that I wanted to be Muslim. It’s beautiful. We all don’t speak the same language, but we all know how to pray the same way. It’s beautiful to be shoulder to shoulder with people from all over the world. One on this side from Kenya, one on that side from China, doing the same motions, praying to the same God. There is a spirit of oneness between us. There’s no racism. We’re all equal, all standing shoulder to shoulder. Everyone’s smiling at each other. It’s hot, you don’t know who’s rich, who’s poor. It doesn’t matter if you have a Lamborghini or if you spent your life savings to make the pilgrimage. Think of a million to two million people doing the same thing.”

Asma Baporia, asked what she wants people to know about Muslims in Mill Valley, responded, “We are people. Just ordinary people living our lives. There are Jews, Hindus, Christians, Muslims, we are all human beings, all good people. We want to follow our religion, hold on to our faith, and hold onto our culture. I think a big issue is that many Americans don’t know any Muslims personally. It is only by speaking to Muslims and learning more about our religion that one can find out that we are just common, hard-working people who want to live a peaceful life. We want to be good, productive citizens. I want my kids to be honorable, honest human beings.”

Abby Wasserman is Editor of REVIEW. Special thanks to Asma Baporia, Hawa Baporia, Fatima Hansia, Khadija Hansia; and Safura Nana, who lent much assistance. Ebrahim Nana’s oral history, taken by Debra Schwartz, is available through the Lucretia Little History Room, Mill Valley Public Library.
The 20-something guy takes a slow spin around and steps forward, one arm out in front of him. “There’s the depot,” he exclaims. “Whoa, there’s the train! Is that Equator?” What he’s peering at in this moment is the site where Equator, the trendy coffee shop that sits on the corner of Throckmorton and Miller avenues, stands today. But what he’s seeing before him is a tall, Victorian-style building, complete with bay windows and a turret, not the two-story neo-Edwardian structure that once housed a department store and is now a coffee shop downstairs and a physical therapy business upstairs.

The young man isn’t feeling the Mill Valley streets under his feet or the wind in his hair as he explores downtown Mill Valley—he’s standing in the Lucretia Little History Room, the local history archives within the Mill Valley Public Library (MVPL). A virtual reality (VR) headset sits atop his head, allowing him to see a virtual world before him. It’s a world that simulates Mill Valley during a slower time, back when silent films played in the local movie theater and the world-famous Mt. Tamalpais and Muir Woods Railway brought in visitors from across the bay and beyond.

This historical virtual world is the brainchild of Ted Barnett, the founder and executive director of a nonprofit called TimeWalk. Back in 2014, Barnett was playing around with a VR headset and realized he could use 3D modeling software and VR to recreate his childhood home and simulate the experience of exploring each room. The experience was powerful, one that brought on an aha moment. “I walked around the side of our Cincinnati home—a home that has since burned down—and saw a spot where I played with my brothers, and I teared up.”

A Mill Valley resident at the time, Barnett began using 3D modeling software to recreate Mill Valley buildings as they were around a century ago. The downtown street layout and certain structures—the depot, the Keystone Building, and others—would still be recognizable, but you’d have elements, like the railway,

**A still from the virtual reality TimeWalk showing the train depot in downtown Mill Valley, circa 1920s, at Miller and Throckmorton avenues. Courtesy of TimeWalk.**

**Tamalpais High School student Jace Monti with his model of Mill Valley’s Old Mill.**
Through this program, high school students would learn about emerging technologies and use historical research materials to recreate local buildings for the TimeWalk virtual world.

At the time of this writing, Building History in 3D was in its second cycle at the library. High school students select a Mill Valley building, work with History Room staff to find reference materials, and then, through a series of hands-on tech classes and workshops, they learn to recreate their buildings using SketchUp 3D modeling software. For some students, history wasn’t necessarily what brought them to the program, but they’ve seen it as a surprisingly fun outgrowth. Tamalpais High School junior Jace Monti was pulled in by the opportunity to develop his 3D modeling skills and learn about Unity, the game development platform that powers the TimeWalk virtual world. Like many students who grew up in Mill Valley, Monti learned about the Old Mill, early settler John Reed, and other historical highlights early on as an elementary school student. “But I didn’t know anything about the businesses and what life was like here until I started researching for my project,” he says. “It was definitely super interesting. That was part of the reason I’m continuing this semester.” In the project’s first semester, Monti modeled the Old Mill. He’s now learning how to animate a 3D model of a train.

“I like the evolution,” says Tamalpais High sophomore Hayley Lucero. “I like learning what happened to that building and how it originated.” Lucero and her classmate Sara Kubo modeled the O’Shaughnessy Building last semester and are now at work on the Outdoor Art Club (OAC). Just the other day they had met with an OAC member who gave them a tour, showed them building plans, and told them about the club’s founding. Kubo, a budding artist, saw Building History in 3D as a way to develop new skills that could be applied to her drawing. Taking part in the program, she felt, was a good opportunity to give back. Students participating in the program are not just learning new skills. They’re actively helping to bring local history to life.

In March of 2018, the library set up a station in the History Room where visitors—like the young man at the beginning of this article—can don a VR headset and explore the growing virtual world to which students have been contributing. The library is also using a 3D printer to print out N-scale models of each building. On many days, the 3D printer is hard at work. Since their debuts in the History Room, the VR headset and the 3D printer have been engaging a wide array of visitors. Third grade students working on local history projects love seeing the toylike models that the 3D printer produces. Young adults and seniors alike have been wowed by the experience of being virtually immersed in the Mill Valley of yore.

For History Room staff, these technologies have made for an exciting demonstration of the past meeting the future, illustrating how new technology can add a compelling lens to local history. Most valuably, TimeWalk and Building History in 3D are engaging residents new and old, young and senior, with our town’s past. They are inspiring new conversations about what the town was, what it is today—and hopefully, where it’s going.
he western slope of Mt. Tamalpais shelters a number of windswept grasslands and forested canyons. Most of this area was occupied as dairy pasture for a century before being acquired as state and federal parkland in the 1970s. But a small and unusual community developed in the uplands of Redwood Canyon in the 1950s, where the buzz and hammering of woodworking alternated with the sounds of jazz riffs, the clack-clack-clack of typewriters, Buddhist chants and gongs, and the laughter of children. A gathering of counterculture writers, artists, and activists visited, hung out, and some even built a life there on a knoll on the southern side of the canyon, just downstream from Muir Woods National Monument. The poet who purchased the land from a struggling rancher named the place Druid Heights.

It is still home to its two longest residents, Ed and Marilyn Stiles, whose independence and creativity were and are emblematic of the early values of the community. They arrived in 1965 as a young married couple and built a life at Druid Heights. Ed, a custom furniture maker, and Marilyn, a ceramic artist, raised a family alongside neighbors who included...
artists, political activists, and visionary thinkers and writers. They had come from the East Coast following their stay in Peru: Marilyn was a Peace Corps volunteer and Ed designed and built custom furniture for a Peruvian company during a year in Lima.

In 1953 Roger Somers, a highly imaginative, risk-taking designer-builder and jazz musician, had persuaded lesbian feminist poet and journalist Elsa Gidlow to purchase the five-acre parcel on Camino Del Canyon in 1963. Ed Stiles had met Somers around that time, so when he came to California with Marilyn, pulling a trailer of tools and machinery, they visited Somers and toured the property. Impressed with an unused 1,000 sq. ft. building, Ed asked if he might do some work there. Somers immediately offered him use of the space if he could use Ed's woodworking tools. After six months, during which Ed commuted from San Rafael to work at Druid Heights, an opportunity opened up to move into a house on the southeastern side of the enclave that had been converted from a chicken barn. Ed renovated the building, using recycled and salvaged materials. After the birth of their children, he tore off the roof and created a second-floor master bedroom, as well as an artist's studio and kiln room for Marilyn.

The Stileses were able to balance creative careers and an intentionally simple, nonconsumer lifestyle. Although a graduate of Dartmouth, Ed had not been comfortable with the concentrated East Coast ethos of the university. At Druid Heights he found an idyllic setting with the freedom to figure things out for himself. “It was extraordinary here. I had everything I cared about,” he recalled recently.

The previous owner of the property, Alphonse Haapa, had planted a windbreak of eucalyptus trees and built three ranch buildings, trying to make a go of a chicken ranch without much success. Elsa Gidlow and Roger Somers, who had met at the American Academy of Asian Studies in San Francisco, struck a deal. Elsa had the money and Roger had design and woodworking talent. She would buy the property and get first choice of living quarters, which he would improve to her liking. That turned out to be the main ranch house, the only building with a real concrete foundation. For himself and his family, Somers extensively remodeled the main old farmhouse, variously called The Dragon House and The Twin Peaks House.

GROWING A COMMUNITY

Leaving Fairfax, where she had been harassed as un-American when serving on the Planning Commission in the late 1940s, Gidlow drew a circle of friends, lovers, activists, and creative spirits to her new home. Because its location enjoyed a degree of sun exposure and wind shelter unique on this wind-swept knoll, she was able to cultivate an extensive garden. For a time, her sister, Thea, lived there in a trailer, until it was condemned by the county. Ed and Marilyn were fond of Thea. Not wanting to lose a friend, Ed built her a separate residence that later became known as Mandala House and was highly modified by Somers.

Remembered as the energy and inspiration for the performance-like atmosphere of the place, Somers had a wide circle of eclectic friends and famous visitors. Because he played the saxophone, oboe, and drums and loved jazz, the workshop complex had expanded to include specially built rooms for music parties and jam sessions. Ed remembers it as the nerve center of Druid Heights. Jams might include Dizzy Gillespie or John Handy. Prime residents also included COYOTE activist and Roger's lover Margo St. James, and Gary Snyder and his wife Masa.
whose second child, Gen, was born during the year the couple lived on the property. Somers elaborated on the preexisting farm buildings, adding fantastical roof lines and interiors, including a Shoji Room to his original farmhouse—the other nerve center of the place, where his daughter, Geraldine, lived with him for a couple of years.

Many iconic figures of the Beat era, the '60s music scene, and other counterculture currents crossed paths at Druid Heights. Perhaps the most well-known resident, albeit sporadic, was Alan Watts, the prolific writer (credited with more than 25 books on philosophy and spirituality) and public speaker who popularized Eastern philosophy and Zen Buddhism, in particular, to Western audiences. As a result of his close friendship with Elsa Gidlow, he and his third wife moved to the seclusion of Druid Heights to live and write in the dwelling Ed Stiles had built for Thea, who had moved out. Building that apple-shaped cabin had taken two years and virtually all of the Stileses' resources, according to Ed. It was Watts who named it Mandala House. The writer dedicated *The Joyous Cosmology: Adventures in the Chemistry of Consciousness* (1962) to the Druid Heights residents. Watts was careful not to tell readers where it was located, but described it as his personal paradise. He died at Druid Heights in 1973.

More than 12 structures remain from this counterculture period, the more substantial of them overseen by Stiles. Somers turned existing buildings into his visions, but Ed was more conservative and cared far more about practical details. When Watts wanted a library, for instance, Ed conceptualized a round redwood structure based on his experience with water tank construction, which Somers and an itinerant carpenter built for Watts. Ed also solved Druid Heights' infrastructure challenges, which included a water pumping system for Elsa's garden and the growing community, and improving and maintaining, with Somers, the dirt road into the property. Trained as a demographer, Ed was conscious of the impact on limited resources as the number of residents increased.

**Growing a Family**

Ed and Marilyn lived both among and apart from the others as they raised a family. Their first son, Seth, was born in late 1966 and Wyeth followed in 1969. Marilyn, trained as an art teacher, commuted to Berkeley for some years, assisting in the open studios at the University of California Associated Students Union. As most of the activity there was in ceramics, she taught herself to work with clay. It had been her dream to live in the country, and at Druid Heights she was surrounded by the woods that inspired her art. Elsa Gidlow invited her to draw and paint in her garden. Marilyn began to sculpt ravens, foxes, frogs, raccoons, and lizards. This led to the whimsical and expressive anthropomorphic animal and reptile ceramic creations for which she is known today.

When Seth and Wyeth were small, they played in their...
father’s workshop or their mother’s studio. They built a time machine and fanciful runways for their marbles out of clay. They called their parents “Ed” and “Marilyn.” As they grew, they were free to explore the world around them. For the most part, there were no other young children on the property. Residences were spread about the wooded slopes. A summer camp operated in the canyon for a period, and the sound of children singing down below remains as a happy memory for Wyeth. When they were old enough, their father built them their own little house next door. They rode their bikes around Druid Heights, skidded on plastic sleds down hillsides slick with fallen eucalyptus leaves, and played in a fort built by their father. Their parents got them a Honda 50 with knobby tires when they were fairly young. Wyeth remembers, “We rode that thing all around the property and up and down the dirt road. Elsa said it sounded like a motorcycle gang going by her house.”

Weekdays, Marilyn and Ed rose before dawn to send their boys off to school. Wyeth and Seth sometimes slid on their backpacks down the hill to the Muir Woods Road to catch the school bus. The trip to Edna Maguire School, then Mill Valley Middle School, then Tamalpais High, took up to an hour and a half. In their free time they wandered in the woods and along the creeks in the canyon, searching for quartz crystals, visiting the waterfalls, watching salmon splashing in the gravel bars, munching on miner’s lettuce for quartz crystals, visiting the waterfalls, watching salmon splashing in the gravel bars, munching on miner’s lettuce and wild strawberries, sitting under the shade of an old oak tree, encountering peacocks, and glimpsing foxes, wild turkeys, bobcats, and other wildlife. On occasion they went as far as Muir Beach. They hiked above Four Corners to fly their homemade balsa gliders. Wyeth ran on the high school cross-country team, which occasionally made training runs to the top of Mt. Tam and back, a nearly 13-mile round-trip.

Time was often measured by seasons and the weather. The boys would watch the fog roll up the canyon or race home when a cold rain caught them suddenly. Wyeth remembers getting pelted with freezing rain bullets: “We struggled to get down the hill and eventually saw my dad running up the hill yelling about why we didn’t have jackets.” Ed recalls that day. He had seen Wyeth and a friend go up the hill behind the workshop, and when the storm descended he went looking for them. His son, he says, would often go out without a jacket. “I found the boys immobilized, so cold they could barely move. I carried them home, one under each arm. It took them a while to warm up and dry out.”

Sometimes Roger Somers invited Seth and Wyeth into his workshop to play pinball and ping-pong. Marilyn remembers that when the boys were young and asking the elemental questions such as “Who made the earth, why is the sky blue?” she sent Seth to Alan Watts, the neighborhood philosopher. Seth returned an hour later with a Möbius strip to explain infinity, saying that

Memories of Roger Somers

Roger had a puffy white cloud of hair atop his head. He seemed to often have a big impish smile on his face and a twinkle in his eye that implied he was up to something, or that he had discovered the punch line to existence. He had a big laugh that resonated throughout the room and I heard it often.

The structures he built had a combination of whimsy and a strong Japanese influence. Roger seldom used straight lines, and he hid utilitarian things like outlets behind or under other things, because he didn’t like the way they looked. Some of the spaces, like the old shop, have trees growing up through the floor and out the ceiling. Basically, the things he created were anything but normal.

When I was a little kid I remember going over to the place under the shop where they had big parties and wandering around, probably in the early hours before things got too weird or crazy.

One time Roger came over to me and my brother and told us he had something new in the shop, something with four legs and a brain, and we should come check it out. It turned out to be a pinball machine. You didn’t have to put any quarters in it to play, just push the button. So I spent some time in the old shop playing pinball. There was also a ping-pong table in there, and some of the games between the adults got pretty heated. You could hear the yelling from all the way across the land.

Wyeth Stiles

The Gidlow Sisters and Alan Watts

Thea, Elsa’s sister, lived in a trailer in the woods. She was a tiny woman with very blue eyes and hennaed hair. When she babysat for us she would sew rickrack and ribbons on her full skirts. She wrote poetry and fancied herself a gypsy.

Roger hooked up a record player in the meadow so Thea could dance and celebrate her birthday. The connection caused an electrical spark and an instant fire that swept through the grass and shot up the hanging bark on the eucalyptus trees. The rest of the day was spent fighting the fire and saving the buildings. Ed rode his motorcycle down to the creek to start the pump so that the volunteer firefighters from Muir Beach could pump out of the water tank.

When Thea was about to lose her trailer due to regulations, Ed built a house on that property so she could stay. That house eventually became Alan Watts’ part-time residence. And then Roger’s.

I remember Alan doing a constitutional some evenings wearing a purple robe and carrying a staff that Ed made for Suzuki Roshi. It came back to Alan when the Roshi died. I first went to the Zen Center when Alan died, and in the deep silence a monk used the same staff walking back to Alan when the Roshi died. I first went to the Zen Center when Alan died, and in the deep silence a monk used the same staff walking from a distance so that it could be heard thudding with each step as he came into the room and shouted for Alan’s spirit to leave. Ed also made a wooden marker for Alan’s ashes.

When Elsa was dying I would visit almost daily and sit in her bedroom. It was very peaceful. Her friends cared for her in shifts. The windows of her room were open to birdsong and soft breezes. The Burmese cat curled near her shoulder. I was told later that the night she died the cat raced around the garden catching gophers and voles and bringing them to her bedside. Food, offerings, or companions?

Marilyn Stiles
Alan had explained that no one made the Earth the way his dad constructed a piece of furniture, but that the planet had grown from a seed. Wyeth remembers that Elsa Gidlow was more intimidating, though the boys were allowed to attend the annual solstice ceremony at her house. There, the neighbors drank hot mulled cider and placed pine boughs in the large stone fireplace to offer up the old year’s regrets or things to leave behind. Marilyn recalls, “Some branches exploded into flame, making everyone laugh. Then we each lit an incense stick to take hopes and good luck from the flame. Elsa served jellied tongue loaf, an English delicacy, while Alan and Roger made jokes in the background.” Ed hated jellied tongue and used to dispose of his portion in a pocket he lined with plastic.

LIFE AS A CRAFTSMAN

Back in 1963, when he first met Somers, Ed had traveled across the country looking for other designer-builders in wood. In Bolinas he met Art Carpenter, a master woodworker and furniture maker known for his California round-edge style, who made the original furniture for the new (1967) Mill Valley Library. Carpenter introduced him to Brazilian rosewood and allowed him to make a table in his workshop. This was a period when self-taught artists rejected mechanized mass production and revitalized the American craft movement. Ed flourished as a craftsman, spurning the pretensions of some contemporary trends in art. His reverence for the beauty of natural materials shows in each piece he created. He favored rosewood, walnut, and oak. His first significant commission at Druid Heights was to make the lectern, lighting fixtures, and an 18 ft. wide chandelier (designed by Warren Callister Associates) for the new Mill Valley Church of Christ Scientist on Camino Alto. Next came commissions for Palo Alto University Lutheran; an Episcopal church in Mountain View; and a chapel associated with a new Catholic hospital complex in Soquel. Ed also built one of Marin County’s first hot tubs at Druid Heights. It became popular with visiting celebrities and led to subsequent commissions in Marin and elsewhere. He developed the design and solved the technical challenges of the early prototypes to satisfy increasingly sophisticated clients, building boilers and engineering gas controls, thermostats, safety devices, and drainage, as well as converting propane to natural gas. He is believed to be the first to build hot tubs with filtered water that could be heated on demand. His projects were reported in two 1971 articles in Sunset magazine. He also built furniture and a recording studio for Graham Nash, including a surround for an electric piano from hyedua, an African wood.

His passion was designing and crafting one-of-a-kind furniture: sleek smooth tables, boxes, piano cabinets, desks, cabinets, music stands, and podiums. His style is sensual and organic. He wanted to make things that could be passed down through a family’s generations. The work had its own brand of irreverence: he sought his own ways of joinery, for example, rather than following tradition. Wyeth Stiles remembers having dinner at Mandala House with Somers, who showed him a coffee table made by Ed. Somers turned the table over and, Wyeth relates, “grinning, pointed out that the ‘legs’ of the table were a little creature, and he had a butt. Roger loved that table.”
ATMOSPHERIC CHANGES IN THE COMMUNITY

Eventually, some 30 people were living at Druid Heights in various makeshift arrangements. “Many amazing, wild, crazy, creative things happened here,” Seth Stiles told an interviewer. “It’s equally fair to say that a lot of people who were here were pretty selfish and not very good neighbors at some times…. They were pretty much their own scene, and that’s not to say that it’s bad, [but] this was a huge party scene.” When hard drug use created some unnerving incidents, Ed protested in vain to Somers, who refused to take the situation in hand. In order to protect their children—there were guns and drugs on the property and a menacing character roaming around unchecked—Ed and Marilyn, disheartened, moved to the San Juan Islands. They had invested their lives in Druid Heights, but Druid Heights was no longer idyllic. Eventually, Somers saw the light when money and valuables were stolen from his house, including his treasured collection of musical instruments. He lowered the boom; the freeloaders and troublemakers decamped; and eventually the Stileses moved back, although retaining property in the Pacific Northwest to which they return every year.

Meanwhile, the federal government was expanding holdings around Muir Woods National Monument in an effort to protect the area from further development. Adjacent to the land designated in 1908 as a national monument, a subdivision tract of some 50 acres named Camp Monte Vista that was likely too rugged for pasturage was sold to various parties in the 1920s. Druid Heights and the other parcels that had been the site of summer camps were eventually absorbed into National Park Service holdings after lengthy disputes. Park Service historians are in the process of establishing the property’s significance for the National Register of Historic Places. The National Register process requires the identification of the physical elements that express the historic values of a place in relationship with the important events or people with which it was associated. This is a challenge for a property where many of the structures are unconventional and falling into decay.

For years, Ed and Roger had worked in independent shops in the same building. After returning to Druid Heights, Ed decided to build his own workshop on a knoll above his home. Depressed because he had fallen out with Roger over the darkening atmosphere at Druid Heights, Ed’s solution was to build something new. “Furniture work is a very specific thing and very disciplined. Build a building because you can,” he told himself. Building had always been a balm—the process of solving problems, of working with wood and tangible materials—and this helped him move forward.

The central gable of Ed’s workshop runs lengthwise above banks of windows that illuminate the space with natural light. He recalls starting to construct the roof on a beautiful spring day and becoming aware of the smell of honey from his nearby hive; the bees feed on nectar from the eucalyptus blossoms and the fragrance is distinctive. At that moment he experienced serendipity. He and his family had this remarkable place with a view of two valleys where they could live and work independently. Ed Stiles felt free.

Gidlow, Somers, and the Stileses negotiated life estates with the Park Service, as has been done elsewhere within the Golden Gate National Recreation Area. This means they own the exclusive use of their property for their lifetime. Elsa died in 1986, and Roger Somers in 2001, both in their Druid Heights homes. The Somers life estate passed to his female partner at the time of his death.

Over the years Ed has mentored other craftsmen carpenters, including Robert Ericson, a well-known furniture maker, whom Art Carpenter initially sent to him as a neophyte. Marilyn was a longtime member of Artisans Gallery in Mill Valley and continues to sell her work at the Muir Beach holiday fair. The couple’s home contains an eclectic gathering of objects from their own history, though few of their own artworks. Their deck, nestled in a small grove of eucalyptus, looks out to the ocean. They will live the remainder of their lives at Druid Heights. The five other residents in the community are all tenants of an original owner. Once all are gone, only the ghosts of craftsmen, musicians, philosophers, and poets will remain, along with the howl of the wind in the trees. The uninhabited buildings are encroached upon by vegetation, the meadow where parties were held is quiet, and Druid Heights is largely a community of wild creatures now. “The peeping of spotted owls were so regular we used to think it was the radar tower on Mt. Tam,” says Marilyn. The spotted owls are still there, and the raccoons and gray foxes have returned. At night coyotes cry out and the horned owls call hoo-hoo-hoo. And the ravens wait on the deck each morning expecting to be fed.

Historian Lissa McKee has lived in Mill Valley for 30 years. She has researched other subjects on southern Marin history, including the ranches in Frank Valley. The colorful history of Druid Heights has been a wonderful opportunity to meet the Stiles family, to whom she is grateful for the stories they have shared.
very month a small miracle takes place in a corner of the Mill Valley Public Library. It starts with members of the community delivering bags, boxes, and sometimes carloads of books. Donations come from Boyle Park to Homestead Valley, from Enchanted Knolls to Marinview, and from downtown to Strawberry and beyond. It ends with the monthly Friends of the Mill Valley Library Book Sale. The books exemplify the diverse and literate character of Marin County citizens. They include best sellers, book club favorites, serious works of biography, history, philosophy, high-technology reference manuals, art and coffee table books, and children’s books. People also donate popular CDs, DVDs, and audio books.

Every week leading up to the weekend of the book sale, dozens of volunteers spring into action. On Monday and Wednesday mornings, teams sort the hundreds of new donations into 60 genres—fiction, poetry, travel, and sports being just a few. At other times during the week, the people in charge of each section arrive to cull, fine-sort, price, and shelve their items. Having one person in charge of each category ensures consistent pricing and timely discarding. On sale days, additional volunteers pitch in to sell upwards of 5,000 items.

In 1967, the year the Mill Valley Library opened its doors at its current location, a group of volunteers calling themselves the Mill Valley Library Association was already in place. Their purpose was to meet others interested in the library; raise money for special projects, equipment, and books not covered by the regular library budget; create public awareness of the library; and to speak out for the library’s interest. Renamed Friends of the Mill Valley Library (FOL for short) in 1976, the group has been spectacularly successful, raising more than $2 million since its inception to support the library’s collection, programs, and services.

“Our collaborators for more than half a century, the Friends have been instrumental in helping the library’s offerings, programs, and collection to stay current with, and often a step ahead of, new technologies and constant revolutions in the public’s needs and interests,” City Librarian Anji Brenner said recently. “This has been possible due to their hard work, of course, but also their deep, spirited sense of responsibility to the community they serve.”

Without the Friends, our library would look and function very differently. First, the collection would probably be mediocre. Friends of the Library supplements the city’s budget for the library’s collection by approximately 30% each year. This enables the acquisition of approximately 750 additional books, allowing selectors to buy not only what is popular and mainstream but to meet the needs of a more eclectic reading population. In addition, the Friends pay for the entire periodical collection of 200-plus magazines; all of the library’s databases; and up until recently, the entire audio book collection. Their fundraising from book sales
and special campaigns has helped the library build a solid and well-respected collection with a breadth and depth that makes using our library a rich experience indeed.

Library events would be less comfortable for patrons without the 200 high-quality folding chairs purchased by the Friends, and the new Young Adult area of the library would not be as beautiful without the bookshelves handcrafted by Tripp Carpenter. The upgraded projector and sound system in the Creekside Room would not exist without FOL efforts. The library’s original computer lab was made possible by a bequest to the Friends and subsequently upgraded in 2012 with new laptops and software, which the Friends co-funded with the Mill Valley Library Foundation. Close to 1,800 people took advantage of the computer lab last year, learning skills ranging from using AirDrop on the iPhone to developing and using Excel spreadsheets. Finally, had the Friends not made funds possible for staff to attend library conferences, we would not so readily have learned about “Take It Make It” kits (offered to patrons who want to try a new skill) and other innovative ideas introduced in libraries around the nation.

The book sale began modestly in 1979 with Mary Jean Jawetz as supervisor of an initial core of 15 to 20 volunteers.

“I did [a bit of] everything,” Jawetz recalls, “including writing out the signs that were posted throughout town. We used muffin tins to make change!”

A few years later, when Joanne Hively became book sale head, she saw ways to make it more efficient and profitable, and began working to implement changes. They included reorganization of the Friends’ permanent space downstairs in the library and recruitment of additional volunteers. Standards for pricing books were developed, and in response to customer requests, volunteers began restocking shelves midway during each sale to offer late-arriving customers an equally great selection. All of these changes had a measurable impact: from 1984 to 1988, sales averaged $15,000 a year, and 10 years later averaged $50,000. In 2007, longtime volunteer Jean Canepa assumed the responsibility of bookstore management, continuing processes that have made the Friends of the Mill Valley Library fundraising a model for other libraries in the county.

In 2012, when Paulette Lueke began managing the bookstore,
she was careful to leave working systems in place while implementing needed changes and new ideas. She recruited additional book sale managers; arranged to sell high-value, obscure books (which number between 250 and 300 each month) to a larger audience on Amazon.com; and assigned a curator, Fran Freeman, to ensure that the Friends’ regular sale shelves in the library are filled with a rotating collection of popular books. Working with FOL treasurer Cindy Rigatti, the bookstore has implemented cash accounting controls and inaugurated credit card use. Roving ambassadors, like Wendy Moskow, were recently instituted to enthusiastically recommend favorite books to customers. Paulette also entrusted a small number of rare books to be sold by reliable consignment dealers; delegated email blasts to Bill Wilson for his creative messaging; and promoted the book sale with the help of Lee Budish and her team through online message boards such as NextDoor.

For many years, the Friends had raised funds primarily for the purpose of acquiring new books, but in 1988 they expanded, targeting funds to include the purchase of a 205-videotape PBS series for $6,000 that included classics like *The Ascent of Man*, *I, Claudius*, and *A Walk Through the 20th Century*. This started the library’s video collection. The Friends also organized cultural programming at the library. Early examples included poetry readings, chamber music and jazz concerts, and speakers on such topics as politics and literature. These cultural programs offered by the Friends have subsequently evolved into the very rich and broad array of programs organized by library staff and funded with combined support of the Friends and the Library Foundation. In May 2001, the Friends started Monday Night at the Movies. The inaugural series, “Three Films About the Japanese American Experience,” showcased the work of Bay Area filmmakers who were present at the screenings. The program, initiated by Joanne Hively, David Robinson, and Dan Druckerman, ran for 15 years and was known for the lively discussions of the California Public Library Advocates after the screenings. All the films purchased for the series were donated to the library and have become a part of the circulating collection.

The Friends have always been an innovative group. In 1994, they promoted the first of three “valentine” campaigns, each raising over $10,000 for books, videos, and other materials. The campaign, which invited the public to “Send a Valentine to the library you love,” won awards from the California Public Library Advocates and National Friends of Libraries, and was replicated by many other libraries nationwide.

All of these contributions took place under the guidance of a very hands-on, active FOL board populated by dedicated volunteers. Three of the current board members represent 55 years of volunteer service: Vivienne Miller has served on the board for 27 years; Lynda Chittenden has served for 18 years, 16 as recording secretary; and former Mill Valley schools principal Jim Derich has served 10 years, two-thirds of them as president. This kind of longevity is not unusual: Friends listed on a plaque in the library have collectively volunteered 1,000 hours.

The Friends represent a tight-knit supportive community that is deeply woven into the very fabric of the library. The additional funding the community of volunteers provides is of critical importance, but it is the joy the Friends experience working...
together, and their unwavering loyalty and dedication, that sustain the library in a way that no amount of funding could ever provide. The Friends are ardent believers in the inherent value of public libraries and tend to be avid readers and library users, attending cultural events like art and theater lectures, participating in book clubs, and pursuing the path of lifelong learning.

They are also dependent upon an active and engaged community that is willing to express support for the library through the payment of modest annual dues. Robust membership (currently 725 members) is of critical importance not only for the additional revenue it represents, but also for the participation of the larger community.

The once-monthly Wednesday afternoon preview sale has become a favorite of a devoted group of regulars who often arrive before the doors open. Customers appreciate both the reasonable prices and the professional way the sale is run. Michael Stephens, a Bay Area book dealer who goes to library book sales all over Northern California, cites the Mill Valley sale as an example of how to do it right. “The prices are low enough to encourage both buying on impulse and in quantity. I feel there is just the right balance in your criteria for accepting donations and doing good for the community. No one does it any better.”

Another essential piece of the bookstore enterprise is finding appropriate homes for the thousands of books culled after each sale to make room for new stock. Friends of the Library supplies books to Book Project and Novato Clinic. The group is also very generous with any community that has suffered a recent disaster, like the Santa Rosa fires in October of 2017, and the fire that burned the Weed Public Library in 2014. Each month a volunteer from the Marin County jail picks up boxes of general interest paperbacks for prisoners. However, most of the books are donated to St. Vincent’s, which has an efficient process for all this bounty.

The current crew of 80 volunteers considers its efforts rewarding and enjoyable. The majority, who range in age from 15 to 95, were recruited into the organization by acquaintances. The fact that they not only benefit the library but also offer a valuable service to the community gives meaning to their generous commitment of time—they process 10,000 books each month!

Sales now reach $90,000 per year—in an era where books are claimed to be obsolete. “It gives me great hope for the future when I watch the small children carefully and enthusiastically selecting their purchases,” Fran Freeman said recently. “Reading is not going to die out any time soon.”

While the staff has changed over the years and muffin tins have been replaced by computers, the Friends continue to rally and thrive, knowing that every book rescued may just change someone’s life.
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The Louvre bar (c. 1900) owned by the Hansen family. Sitting on the bar, young Ted Hansen, with his father Jack and two uncles. Photo courtesy of the Lucretia Little History Room, Mill Valley Public Library.