From the President

As we reach the halfway point in this decade, we are forcefully reminded of the fragility of human life and of the environment upon which life depends. Here in Mill Valley, between Mount Tamalpais and Richardson Bay, we are blessed, but our blessing does not confer immunity. If anything, it should enrich our sense of place, of what is encompassed in our here and now. This is, I think, Richardson Bay, we are blessed, but our blessing makes us more conscious of the responsibility of stewardship passed on to us by our predecessors. This is easy if... for fish in our creeks.

More broadly, do we take Voltaire’s advice that it is best to turn to the cultivation of our gardens when, to paraphrase Yeats, things are falling apart and it seems that the center cannot hold? This is where history comes in, particularly local history.

The Annual Review which you are now perusing and the annual Walk into History are touchstones that connect past with present. In doing so they enlighten and enrich our sense of place, of what is encompassed in our here and now. This is, I think, more important than ever, for a sense of place, of the interaction of people, environment, and values, is magical. It is magical in its ability to enrich community values and in its portability, for it goes out into the world with us. How cool is it (to use the language of my youth) that we have a tiny park dedicated to someone who wrote a symphony? This is the kind of thing we take with us when we travel, and it makes us receptive and attentive to cool things in other places.

The Mill Valley Historical Society focuses on the local history of Mill Valley. After all, this is our place, it is where we live. We love it and want to preserve it. It is not the novel of the universe, but it is, still, a great place to learn that there are many novels of the universe. So on behalf of our Board of Directors I present two labors of love for your enjoyment, the 2005 Annual Review and the 2005 Walk into History.

Sincerely,

John Leonard
The steps, lanes and paths of Mill Valley are unique features of our town. They were laid out by Michael O'Shaughnessy, San Francisco City Engineer, who designed and built the Hechle Hendy Dam, which is still the primary source of water for San Francisco. O'Shaughnessy lived in Mill Valley, and laid out the town at a time when we did not have an aerocentric community, but relied primarily on the railroad for transit. Residents of the hills and weekend hikers alike could easily find their way on the myriad steps, lanes and paths to homes and the upper trails of Mount Tamalpais.

Files in the Mill Valley Library's History Room indicate references anywhere from 76 to 275 of these "lanes, trails and alleys." Mill Valley was once known as "10,000 steps hung on the side of Mt. Tamalpais," and early residents also referred to the steeper paths as "chutes."

In January 2002, a small group of interested Mill Valley residents, organized under the direction of Victoria Talkington, met to discuss the revitalization of the steps, lanes and paths of our town. Attendees included: John Leonard, Joan Murray, Chuck Oldenburg, Jane Richmond and Dick Spotwood. This evolved into a group named Step by Step.

A decision was made to draw attention to the steps, lanes and paths by creating attractive signage so that passersby would know that what may appear to be a private path was actually public access. This would encourage parents to allow children to walk to school, utilization of the step systems for emergency evacuation, and invite usage for leisurely walking for others.

The Mill Valley Historical Society, the Outdoor Art Club and the Mill Valley Rotary Club rights of way. To that end, a bid was extended by the City for the extensive repair to Lane #18, oft referred to as Jacob's Ladder, which winds it way through eucalyptus trees from lower Miller to Ethel Avenue. Closed due to disrepair, this well-used stair system will be open to the public in the near future.

Continued efforts and attention by citizen to the steps, lanes and paths should also prevent loss of our existing shortcuts, that generations of school children, commuters and hikers have enjoyed.

Mill Valley was once known as "10,000 steps hung on the side of Mt. Tamalpais."
Nook Armager
Hometown Boy and Local Hero

A redwood grove in Boyle Park is named after long-time Mill Valley Fire Chief Leslie "Nook" Armager. In addition to working for the Mill Valley Fire Department for over thirty years, what deeds of Nook's inspired others to name the redwood grove after him? Some say it was because as a young boy, Nook watered the trees that were planted in memory of Mill Valley's World War I veterans in that dusty section of Boyle Park. However, if you examine the man and his deeds, it is obvious why tribute was paid to his memory in this way.

Nook Armager was born in Mill Valley on East Bithedale near Dell Lane in 1909. As a boy, he was lauded for his efforts to save a drowning friend with whom he'd been swimming at the upper end of Richardson Bay. This occurred near what was known as the Alto powerhouse, located at the base of Enchanted Knolls, close to the current bike path behind the Mill Valley Community Center. Nook's friend, Charles Huntoon, was clearly in distress and called for help to his friend. The water was reported to have been cold and rough and Charles was thought to have had a "somewhat weak heart." It was later reported that he had been feverish shortly before their swim. Although two other local boys accompanied them, they were already on the opposite shore when Charles called for help and could not assist in the attempted rescue. Nook swam to help his friend, but Charles was heavier than he was. When Charles loosened his grip on him it gave further conjecture to Charles' reported heart condition. Unable to pull him from the water, Nook leapt on his friend's bike and sped up to the Bank of Mill Valley at Throckmorton and Corte Madera Avenues to alert Charles' father, who was the bank's cashier. Mr. Huntoon and Nook were followed in his automobile by the town marshall, the town clerk and the superintendent of schools as they drove towards upper Richardson Bay against all hope of rescue. Charles' body wasn't found for almost four hours and, even at that, additional efforts were made to resuscitate him. Thirteen years old at the time, Nook almost drowned trying to save his friend. Perhaps it was here that Nook began to appreciate the importance of community.

EARLY FIREFIGHTING DAYS

Nook started as a fire fighter with the City of Mill Valley during the Depression. After his graduation from Tamalpais High School, he worked for a short time at Varney's Hardware in downtown Mill Valley. He fought the Fire of 1929, which destroyed 117 homes on the Mill Valley slopes of Mount Tamalpais. And, he was reported as stating that the most destructive structural fire that he ever fought was in 1963 at the Jolly King Market at 335 Miller Avenue. That fierce fire burned the entire interior, except for a large freezer.

Nook became Mill Valley Fire Chief after he joined the department and kind man, he also had a reputation for improvement had been made. "They have never improved on that."

During the time that Nook was fire chief, what was known as the "whistle" was blown at 5:00 p.m. each day from the city hall. The blast of the day was a signal that two or three call children could get away with telling your mother that it was time.

HONORABLE MAN

Nook was sure to make himself known who needed it. One story, told by Gene Stocking, demonstrates what he was like. Gene and his house built into a hill with just an entrance and without a driveway. Gene had meningitis in 1956 and was too sick to be released from Ross Hospital for delivering a patient back to Ross and that the two of them, that long, winding path to the house, was affordable. And, the ambulance Nook suggested to Bert that the patient get away with telling your mother that it was time.

In 1961, Nook was honored by the Marin County chapter of the Red Cross for his successful effort to save a three-year-old Oakdale Avenue girl who was found at the bottom of a children's swimming pool. Artificial respiration and a fire department inhaler were used, and did not work. Not gas-to-mouth respiration for 15 minutes.

FAMILY LIFE

The Armager home at 69 Willow Avenue is where Nook was born. After the death of Nook's wife Nellie in 1957, daughter, Lucy Mellor, told us...
Nook became Mill Valley Fire Chief in 1942, just ten years after he joined the department. Known as a generous and kind man, he also had a reputation as a tease. When asked what improvements had been made in fire suppression, he replied, "They have never improved on water."

During the time that Nook was with the fire department, what was known as the "whistle," would blast at noon and 5:00 p.m. each day from the downtown fire station. The first blast of the day was a signal that it was time for lunch and the second blast alerted children to come home from playing. Hundreds of children in Mill Valley were raised during that time knowing that the fire whistle meant that you couldn't get away with telling your mother that you didn't know what time it was.

HONORABLE MAN
Nook was sure to make himself available to help out anyone who needed it. One story, told by lifetime Mill Valley resident Gene Stocking, demonstrates why Nook received such respect and was so well liked. Gene and her husband Bert lived in a house built into a hill with just a long, narrow pathway for entry and without a driveway. Gene had mysteriously developed meningitis in 1956 and was hospitalized for two weeks. She was to be released from Ross Hospital, but usage of an ambulance for delivering a patient back home wasn't commonplace or affordable. And, the ambulance would have no close parking. Nook suggested to Bert that they pick her up at the hospital in Ross and that the two of them carry her by stretcher down that long, winding path to their home. And, that's what they did.

In 1961, Nook was honored by the Marin County chapter of the American Red Cross for his successful efforts to save a three-year-old Oakdale Avenue girl after she was found at the bottom of her parent's swimming pool. Artificial respiration and a fire department inhalator were used and did not work. Not giving up, Nook began mouth-to-mouth respiration for 15 minutes and the child was revived.

FAMILY LIFE
The Armstrong home at 69 Walnut Avenue was sold after the death of Nook's wife Nellie in 2000, at the age of 94. Their daughter, Lucy Mellor, told us that Nook slept in a downstairs bedroom where he had a firebell installed so that he wouldn't wake his family. Any fire call in Mill Valley resulted in a response by Nook.

Lucy had many stories about her father and said he was known to have saved the lives of a number of Mill Valley citizens from suicide attempts. Her father suffered scratches on his arm as he rescued a cat from under a dishwasher. The cat's paw was entangled in the wires of the dishwasher and the fire chief cut the wires and untangled the cat. He was also known to have rescued various children from bathrooms that had been inadvertently locked.

Nook died in 1969 at 60 after a two-year bout with cancer. He had been retired only three days. He was representative of a different time in Mill Valley and was a hometown hero, a man who deserved to have a redwood grove in a cherished park named after him.

—Joan Murray
Spotlight on Mill Valley Parks

The evolution of parks in Mill Valley has had one historical constant—that of a concerned group of citizens behind every effort to provide recreation for residents. Today, the City of Mill Valley supports a total of fifteen parks, some of which are natural unvegeted open space. At the strong urging of the Outdoor Art Club, a parks and recreation commission was established by the city council in 1954. As a result of her involvement in these efforts, the club recommended that longtime activist and politician, Vera Schultz serve on the new commission. She became instrumental in the establishment of some neighborhood parks.

It wasn't until 1965 that a separate parks and recreation department was created, initially to oversee the development of our future open space. Today, this department is responsible for substantially more than open space development.

Since 1965, all Mill Valley parks have been improved, developed and some have even expanded, as well as having had new parks added.

One of the first organized efforts by the citizens of Mill Valley for park development was related to the site on which Old Mill School is now located. The northeast corner near Old Mill Street covers what was a popular sulfur spring and an effort to purchase it, shortly after the City of Mill Valley incorporated, failed. In 1908, a bond issue passed that designated that $8,000 be used for parklands. It was just the beginning of efforts by many people who, over the years, would preserve and develop land for recreational use.

OLD MILL PARK

Old Mill Park is one of our first parks and is the entry to the Dipsea stairs, which have long been a focal point for weekend hikers. It was part of the land turned over by the Tamalpais Land and Water Company to the City of Mill Valley just after incorporation in 1900. It contains the sawmill built by Mexican land grantee, John Reed, hence its name. Restored in 1991, children and adults have climbed its structure for over a generation before anyone realized they were defacing an historic structure.

Today you'll find Gravity Car #9 B Muir Woods and Mount Tamalpais RR residing in the park along with updated equipment for children. The Muir Woods provide welcome shade on summer days along a peaceful creek in 1909 there was a swimming hole.

OLD MILL PARK Clean Up, 1903

KATHLEEN NORRIS

Kathleen Thompson Norris, is to add land to Old Mill Park in 1931, Kathleen was the highest point. The 1997 Mill Valley Historical historic home built in 1891. The Norris Memorial Park is located Norris was present with her brother
have climbed its structure for over a century and sweethearts carved their initials on it for generations before anyone realized that they were defacing an historic structure.

Today you’ll find Gravity Car #9 from the made boat races. There are still picnic tables and a viewing area for popular movies at night in the park. Today, the park is much appreciated for its serene setting, with the creek providing a peaceful backdrop.

The family home was Treehaven, still located at Molino and Wildomar Avenues. In 1931, Kathleen was the highest paid woman in the United States and much admired. The 1997 Mill Valley Historical Review is about the Thompson family and their historic home built in 1931. The 1.3 acre redwood grove dedicated as the Kathleen Norris Memorial Park is located at Molino Avenue and Lockwood Lane. Kathleen Norris was present with her brother, Fred Thompson, at the 1946 dedication.

BLOCH PARK

Even in Mill Valley there was some competition for the world’s smallest park. At one time, the small cluster of redwoods at the corner of West Blithedale and Eldridge Avenues was listed as the smallest park in the world and reported to the newspaper future, Ripley’s Believe It or Not! Later documentation from A.E. Almcrans, City Manager of Mill Valley at the time, stated that the redwood tree cluster was not a city park.

However, Bloch Park is certainly the smallest official park in Mill Valley today and can be measured in mere feet. It contains a bench and a memorial stone and is located near the entrance to the park. The park is named after Libby Bloch, who lived in the area and was a strong advocate for preserving the redwoods. The park is a peaceful retreat for those who wish to enjoy a small piece of nature in the heart of Mill Valley.
next to the Corte Madera Del Presidio Creek behind Mill Valley City Hall. Ernest Bloch was a composer, best known for his symphony, "America," which he wrote on weekends while in a cabin on Magee Avenue. He was the Director of the San Francisco Conservatory of Music from 1925 to 1930. His descendants were active in the local art community and were the original owners of Demented's Frame Shop. The park was dedicated in 1989.

SCOTT HIGHLANDS PARK

In 1959, the Mill Valley Parks and Recreation Commission set aside $2,000 to spend on improvements needed at Scott Highland Park, and an additional $500 was donated by the Scott Highlands Neighborhood Association. Later in 1987, once again, the neighbors would spend a year and a half to revamp the park with new ground cover and play equipment.

MILLER GROVE

As a memorial to her son, Clarence, Mrs. Annie D. Miller donated the 1.17 acre Redwood Grove between Corte Madera and West Blithedale Avenues. An adjacent lot was purchased by the women of the Outdoor Art Club and deeded to the City of Mill Valley. The women of the Outdoor Art Club raised $2,764 in 120 days to purchase the lot alongside the Arroyo Corte Madera del Presidio to add to the planned park. They were not the same Miller family for whom Miller Avenue is named.

The gift of land from Mrs. Miller "must be maintained as a municipal park and preserved as a redwood grove."

BOYLE PARK

Carmelita Garcia Boyle donated two acres for a park in 1906, just months before her death. Two adjacent lots were purchased from the Boyle family and other property owners in 1908 with proceeds from the successful park bond issue that passed that year. More lots were purchased at three different times in the 1930s and in 1938 handball and tennis courts were added to expand the types of recreation available. Today, Boyle Park consists of more than seven acres.

The municipal tennis courts are very popular and there is also a recently updated playground area. Additionally, there is a huge grassy area for barbecues, picnics and Frisbee tossing. Flag football was also a popular sport played there in years past. The newly defunct Mill Valley Lion's Club hosted an annual barbecue fundraiser that drew hundreds of residents from the late '50s through the '70s. The Mill Valley Rotary Club replaced the Warner Creek Bridge that connects one side of Boyle Park to another in 1994. The bridge was dedicated to Robert W. Graver, a traffic engineer and executive, with the California State Automobile Association who was also a longtime, active member of Rotary. Bob was a resident of Mill Valley from 1950 until his death in 1994. He was a member of the Mill Valley Planning Commission and was on the commission when the controversial vote to split the baseball field into two diamonds took place.

Boyle Park is also home to some beautiful century-old Coast Live Oaks that have been climbed by generations of Mill Valley children.

Barry Spitz reports in his book, "Mill Valley, The Early Years," that "Baseball was clearly THE sport of early Mill Valley." Semi-professional teams played there, in addition to amateurs, long before it became the primary home to Mill Valley's Little League. Boyle Park

FREEMAN PARK

Freeman Park is just under one acre, and situated between Ryan and Nelson Avenues in one of the Goheen developments. One of the charms of Freeman Park is its pedestrian only access. Perhaps that's not quite true since equestrians and bicyclists have found their way on the path to the park, but it is not accessible to vehicles, which is part of its appeal. Originally known as the Ryan Park playground, it was renamed for Mrs. M. Della Freeman after she designated that the proceeds from her estate be used for a park. Mrs. Freeman had been a teacher at the old Summit School from 1915 to 1920.

In 1952, the Mill Valley Optimists succeeded in removing rocks and added shrubs donating their efforts and $300. Later plans show that the City of Mill Valley paid $315.50 for a jungle gym and slide.

MILL VALLEY GOLF COURSE AND CLUBHOUSE

Developing a golf course was a long time goal of some early Mill Valley residents, but these efforts didn't result in anything concrete until 1919 when a group of seventy-five men purchased 42 acres in Warner Canyon, at what was reported to have been $500 an acre. A nine-hole, 2,200-yard course opened later that year.

Plans for a projected 300 members, the Mill Valley Golf Club never materialized and during the decade of the Depression membership had dwindled to 38 members. As a result, the members offered the golf course to the City of Mill Valley for $25,000, even though it was then valued at $40,000. A two-thirds majority vote was required to pass a bond measure and it was on the third effort that it finally passed.

MOLINO PARK

Local political visionary Vera Schultz had originally encouraged the purchase of tax delinquent lots for park usage and Molino Park was a result of that idea. Located at Molino and Jane's Avenues, the city purchased Lot #53, which is almost one acre in size, in 1945 for $1,000. Recent efforts by local residents have upgraded this long neglected park, and basketball courts and playground equipment are now available.
Mill Valley's Little League used primarily in the 1950s. Today it has a wonderful expansive grassy area as well as a playground and the Mill Valley Little League has found fields to use in other parks.

PROJECT 17/BAYFRONT PARK
Home of Mill Valley's original community center, this land was also used for a popular horse ring. Consisting of 16.53 acres, this plot was referred to as Project 17 for the amount of acreage it covered. The railroad tracks ran behind the property where a multiple use path now serves many recreation lovers who come from beyond Mill Valley.

The Ranch Wagon Restaurant was purchased by the City of Mill Valley for $1.00 and barged over to Project 17. Volunteers leveled the many large mounds of dirt that developers had been allowed to fill on the property.

The name of Project 17 has disappeared, but the use of the land has expanded to a beautiful new community center, replete with swimming and diving pool. New soccer and softball fields, a dog run and a small boat ramp are available.

Until the middle of the 1950s, a large redwood bridge carried Mill Valley traffic from Highway 101 north, and ended near the Mill Valley Middle School. It was also
the site of the local garbage dump. Un
Lomita Drive was built to carry traffic
East Birchdale Avenue, this lovely ripar
area was not open for usage.
In the early 1970s there was an ambiti
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The dredge spoils of this effort
became what is now much of what is
Bayfront Park. In 1981, the small
boat dock at Bayfront Park was stolen,
a mystery that was never solved.

HAUCKE PARK
Haucke Park was named after Mill
Valley resident Jerry Haucke. Jerry
served on the Mill Valley City Coun
cil, was a Parks and Recreation Com­
missoner and Director of the Mill
Valley Arts Festival. He was Citizen
of the Year in 1986, as well. Jerry saw
the site of the local garbage dump. Until Lomita Drive was built to carry traffic on East Blithedale Avenue, this lovely riparian area was not open for usage.

In the early 1970s there was an ambitious proposal for development of a nearby marina with an extensive yacht harbor and a theme park called Marine World. One hundred and twenty-five rental berths were planned as well as 48 additional berths for sales and transient usage. The dredge spoils of this effort became what is now much of what is Bayfront Park. In 1981, the small boat dock at Bayfront Park was stolen, a mystery that was never solved.

HAUCKE PARK

Haucke Park was named after Mill Valley resident Jerry Haucke. Jerry served on the Mill Valley City Council, was a Parks and Recreation Commissioner and Director of the Mill Valley Arts Festival. He was Citizen of the Year in 1986, as well. Jerry saw an opportunity to create a multi-use park that would greatly expand the area available to organized league sports after seeing the huge amount of dirt that was added to the area near the current public safety building as a result of the nearby development of Baca-lypes Knolls. His vision and dedication are responsible for seizing the potential opportunity that was obvious only to a few.

THE FUTURE OF MILL VALLEY PARKS

Open space in Mill Valley includes Earnscleff Canyon Park, West Blithedale Canyon Park, and the Edgewood Botanical Garden. The area known as the Tenderfoot Trail in Cascade Canyon is Mill Valley's newest acquisition. With the inevitable development of the limited land remaining in Mill Valley, preserving open space is even more critical today. There will be evolving sports and activities that we might not be able to imagine today, but we can imagine that future Mill Valley residents will be staunchly providing support for those efforts.

— Jason Murray
Buried Secret Unearthed

April 24, 2004. It was an ordinary, bright and sunny day. Until all the screaming began.

Being a contractor in Mill Valley is no easy task to begin with. However, when Maverick Construction was given the task of removing the foundation of the house at 10-12 Manor Terrace, there was to be more to the job than mere excavation. The new owners of the house, the Connolly family, knew their new home, Cypress Knolls, was the oldest documented house in Mill Valley, having been built by Carmelita Natividad Garcia and her husband Hugh Aloysius Boyle, in 1885. But there were a few things they didn’t know. After receiving a frantic cell phone call in Spanish from his workers on the site, Pete McKinney of Maverick Construction, crept down into the dark and dusty 18 inches of crawl space beneath the house as he tried to determine just what a wooden-plank box was doing stuck under a pier. All of a sudden the top gave way revealing a skeleton.

When asked his reaction to this discovery, McKinney replied with a laugh, “You can’t print what I yelled out.” Asked what he did next, he answered, “I have never moved faster in my life. I knew it was something bad. I just wanted out of there.” And then he called 911. That brought the police, who taped off the area as a crime scene.

To determine if there was any foul play involved, the Marin County Coroner was called in.

Ken Holmes had been the County Coroner going on eight years. This case had all the markings of something intriguing. When he arrived on the scene, conner’s tape replaced the police tape. Assessing the situation immediately, Holmes deduced, Fall burial, in a coffin, well dressed. Seldom signs of a clandestine burial of a murder victim.

Thus the real digging began. Rory Walsh, Mill Valley’s Director of Planning and Building remarked at the time, “It certainly is not what you typically find on a construction site.”

City Manager Don Hunter immediately placed a stop-work order on the house until the coroner investigated the site. He said work would probably resume in a few days, but things could get complicated if more graves were found. “It may be the only body up there,” he said. “We’re just going to have to find out, and that’s the Coroner’s bailiwick. There’s no data that we’re aware of that shows a legal cemetery in that location."

The rough hewn, redwood coffin with its square nails had blade marks from a saw that was not available before 1855. Just how deep was the coffin?

Holmes says it was normal in those days to bury a coffin just a few feet below the surface, contrary to our colloquial reference to burials being “six feet under” today. This coffin was set in rocky soil as well. The construction company was digging just eight to 12 inches deep when they hit the coffin. The house seems to have been unknowingly built on top of the coffin. A pier had been placed directly on the coffin lid.

Back in the late 1800s, the Boyle mansion had been built on the high point of a grassy knoll for all to see as they came down the dirt road that would become Blithedale Avenue. The mansion sat alone for years on acres of open grassland with large herds of cattle and dairy cows grazing. Park School now stands on a few acres of this dusty pasture.

The Caucasian male skeleton was about five feet eight inches and had a full set of teeth. This initially lead the coroner to believe that the person was much younger than the final age determined to be late thirties to early forties. Retaining a full set of teeth was rare for a person of that age back then. Holmes says this was due to the rugged 19th century way of life. “Just living to fifty was ‘getting up in age’ and sixty or seventy was quite an accomplishment.”

What tyke volumes was the decedent’s fine, silk-lined wool suit with its matching trousers. The three molded-glass buttons were common for that period. However, the small scrap of newspaper stuffed in the gentleman’s hand did not say much. The text spoke of legislative events that would seem traceable, but Holmes commented that, “They can’t be tracked … it’s not about the expense of such a task … it is because it was just a part of a very old article—with no identifiers.”

Holmes announced to the

The rough hewn, redwood coffin with its square nails had blade marks from a saw that was not available before 1855.

With snow-covered Mount Tamalpais in the background, the three molded-glass buttons on the coffin lid are clearly visible. The buttons were common for that period, but the text spoke of legislative events that would seem traceable, but Holmes commented that, “They can’t be tracked … it’s not about the expense of such a task … it is because it was just a part of a very old article—with no identifiers.”

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Holmes announced to the public and press, “It was a proper burial... the man was dressed and laid out. It wasn’t like he was dumped into a hole.” Could the contents of this coffin have been the long lost remains of early Mill Valley settler John Thomas Reed? Hopefully, time will tell.

Holmes and his assistant Pamela Carter plowed on and mind you, that means on their hands, knees and bellies at times. Could this be a family plot? No stone would be left unturned.

They hit pay dirt; a second much more disintegrated coffin containing the skeleton of a man of eighteen to twenty-two years was unearthed within a week. This complete Caucasian skeleton was six feet—eigthy inches—tall for those times. Only a few shreds of cloth and a few buttons remained, but enough to suggest the second coffin may have been buried around the same time of the primary coffin.

The coffin was some 30 feet apart with no sense of alignment. Even more scattered were the few fragments of bone found as the Coroner sifted through the site—not a long bone or a skull—not much. These few remains were in a much more advanced state of decay and had been “significantly disturbed,” said Holmes as he commented on their condition and location. Holmes explained that the soil containing the few fragments was probably brought to the site as fill from another location during previous grading or con-

A redwood coffin with nails had blade in a saw that was table before 1855.

Holmes had been on the scene in 1880, the then Boyle mansion had been built on the high point of a gentle knoll for all to see as they came down the dirt road that would become Blvd. Avenue. The mansion sat alone for years on acres of open grassland with large herds of cattle and dairy cows grazing. Park School now stands on a few acres of this dairy pasture.

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Could the contents of this coffin have been the long lost remains of early Mill Valley settler John Thomas Reed?

With snow-covered Mount Tamalpais in the background, the Cypress Knolls mansion sat all by itself in 1880.
The Miwok were sometimes known to bury their dead beneath the decedent's hut amongst their belongings.

Where the coffin was found is acknowledged to be the oldest standing building in Mill Valley. Archaeologists argue over the date of construction: 1883 or maybe earlier in 1871. This may have something to do with the fact that in 1865, at the age of nineteen, Carmelita Natividad Garcia married 21-year-old Hugh Alyson Boyle, and they moved to the Reed Ranch in 1871. Boyle gave up his position as secretary to the Mayor of San Francisco to raise a family and operate a dairy ranch in Marin. The house site, named Cypress Knolls, was part of the 325-acre estate of the heiress Carmelita National Garcia. Carmelita was the daughter of Hilaria Sanchez Reed Garcia and Bernardino Garcia. Mr. Garcia was the second husband of the widow of John Thomas Reed. Two years after Reed died, in 1843, Garcia married Hilaria.

John Thomas Reed had been born in Dublin, Ireland in 1805, and arrived in Marin by boat in 1826. He settled in Sausalito as its first white, English-speaking inhabitant. He had, however, just spent five years in Mexico. He was a Catholic, fluent in Spanish, and familiar with the customs of Mexico. In 1834, he petitioned to become a naturalized Mexican citizen. This was a first step to getting a land grant.

Reed was befriended by the Commandant of the Presidio in San Francisco, and married his youngest daughter, Hilaria, in 1836. In 1834, he was the recipient of a Mexican land grant of 4,428 acres. He logged, raised cattle and sheep, traded venison, row calves and bear skins. He did ferrying and had a stone quarry and a brickyard. He built the landmark mill that gave Mill Valley its name.

A real pioneer, he had built his first adobe house near what is now La Guma Street. Building a house was a requirement for obtaining a land grant in what was then a territory of Mexico. The devout Catholic couple had four children and was well liked by the Indians. At the age of thirty-eight, after falling from his horse due to sunstroke, John was "bled". The resulting excessive bleeding caused his death. He was buried in a mission cemetery in San Rafael and then moved to the nearby Mt. Olive Cemetery. However, there is no documentation of that event.

Again, could the man who was short in stature be John Thomas Reed? The height and age make sense. Could his remains have been re-buried closer to his home? Of the first found gentleman, Holmes says, "He was probably a man of some means to be buried in those clothes in that period." Holmes said. He added, "A lot of people didn't have a suit back then, and this was a very fine wool, a beautiful weave... similar to herringbone."

The Coroners department searched the Reed family tree and actually located a descendent of John Thomas Reed in the Midwest with the goal of tracing DNA from the bones. Finding this needle in a haystack was a dead end. "DNA is passed down through the mother. We do not have a direct link via all females from the bones to the survivor," Holmes said. The identity of the bones will most probably always be a mystery.
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And where are the bones now? As Holmes described it, "All the
bones were examined, aligned
and laid out as to anatomical
correctness. Then they were placed in
a body bag and re-interred."

Legally, the owner of a prop-
erty in such a case is given the
option to bury the remains in a
proper cemetery, at the property
owner’s expense. The current
owners of Cypress Knolls felt
that the bones “final resting
place” should be where they were
unearthed. The bones have been
interred back under the house.

Sean Connolly, the present
owner, likes to tell of the day he
heard the news of the discovery
of the first coffin. “I was sitting at
my desk when I received a call
from my contractor who asked
me, ‘Are you sitting down?’”
Connolly was sitting down. The
contractor continued, “We found
a body in a coffin under your
house.” Connolly replied, “Is that
all?” Anyone who has remodeled
a house or heard horror stories of
upset neighbors during construc-
tion will understand his reaction.

And what about the house? According to Barry Spira, the
author of Mill Valley, the Early
Years, the Cypress Knolls house
“served as a center for the old
Reed ranch way of life, with
many former Reed friends and
workers as guests.” Carmelita
was one of the last Californias, a
member of one of California’s great
Mexican land-holding families.
The year Carmelita was born,
1846, the Bear Flag rebellion led
the way to American occupation
of California and the end of an era.
Carmelita went on to outlive her
husband Hugh and in 1899 left
Cypress Knoll for San Francisco
after suffering partial paralysis
from a Mill Valley junction train
demolition. In 1906, she donated
two choice acres to the city of Mill
Valley as part of a proposed sub-
division plan. Those two acres became Boyle Park. Plans for sell-
ing the rest of the subdivision
were postponed when the earth-
quake of 1906 struck. An injured
Carmelita was moved from her
hotel room to a tent in Golden
Gate Park, and she soon died
of pneumonia. Her will was
probated in 1909, and the selling
of the subdivision resumed.

The grand mansion called
Cypress Knolls, lives on. The
house survived an extensive
Mediterranean-style renovation
in 1912, and eventually became
a four-unit apartment house. The
present owners were converting
it back to a gracious single res-
dence when this story started.
End of story. For now.

—Beth Kuhler