Mill Valley Historical Review
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Mill Valley Historical Society
Blythedale, the first hotel in Mill Valley, was built by Dr. John S. Cushing in 1873 and actually began as a sanitarium. When Cushing died in 1879, it closed briefly, reopening as a hotel. In 1912 the main hotel building was demolished and the land subdivided into 70 choice lots, including in some cases the original hotel cottages. Some stand today. Closing was apparently a result of decreasing business, as the automobile enabled families to range farther from home.

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About This Issue

This issue is timed to coordinate with the annual walk into history sponsored by the Mill Valley Historical Society. As always, more and more interesting facts and photos surface as publication nears, and this time we have found some real beauties for your thirsty eyes. Jack Barnard, our energetic president, is largely responsible for this issue—coordinating content, lining up advertisers, even writing and editing copy throughout the issue. We are also grateful to Helen Van Cleave Park and Jean W. Keller for their contributions, and because of a most helpful staff at Paragraphs, your editor has managed once again to pull off another issue.

Special thanks as always to Thelma Percy, Jean Hitchcox, Dorothy Hood and Dorothy Ortman for their help in the library history room. As with each previous issue, one or two truly unusual photographs emerge. This time the cover photo is our piece de resistance.

About the Cover Photo

This photo was taken of a very old painting of Blythedale Canyon as it was in the hey-day of the Blythedale Hotel. The painting is now owned by the California Historical Society, which has granted us permission to use a reproduction of it on our cover.

Mrs. James Jenkins, granddaughter of Dr. John Cushing, who built the Blythedale Hotel, has been able to identify the structure on the far left as the Blythedale Hotel. Some of the other buildings are cottages named for the Monteagle, Moore and Parker families, who built them under some arrangement with Cushing. Mrs. Jenkins also commented that she couldn’t identify the rocks in the right foreground. Artist’s license?

For those who are especially interested, we have in the Lucretia Little History Room in the Mill Valley Library a fine 8 x 10 color reproduction of this painting. The print was made from a color slide taken by Nancy and Roy Farrington Jones, the photographers who are famous for their marvelous collection of slides of paintings done by early California artists.

Letter to The Editor

The “milhouse”, once a part of the Blythedale Hotel and mentioned in our feature story, still stands as part of a residence at 209 West Blythedale. Some controversy has surrounded its origin. One claim holds that it was once an adobe Mexican hunting lodge. More information comes from the Ida Allen oral history, wherein she states her Grandfather King owned a dairy ranch on the Blythedale site in the early 1850’s. Through used even then as a milkhouse, there is no evidence that he built it.

Looking at the structure today leaves no doubt that rocks and boulders from the creek were used. The controversy, and possible clue to its origin, surrounds the type of mortar used—adobe or unashed sand from the creek.

Prominent soils engineer Michael Prasker helped by analyzing a piece of the mortar. Through sophisticated methods, he has determined that the mortar is adobe, a clay material not totally unknown in pre-Mill Valley, since John Reed’s 1842 house at LaGoma and Locke Lane was built entirely of adobe mortar and bricks.

John Barnard

Mary Paschi Ker, design
Stephen Abramson, photo reproductions

This was written by John Barnard, our energetic president, and designed by Mary Paschi Ker. Special thanks as always to Thelma Percy, Jean Hitchcox, Dorothy Hood and Dorothy Ortman for their help in the library history room.
The Blithedale Story

by Helen Van Cleave Park

Grand old hills, oak clad and scarred, towering to the clouds in their majesty, gurgling brooks winding through meadowy fields of corn with the breeze waving and rustling their ripening heads and floating streamers. Winding around and through these, a stretch of yellow road, silent in the glare of the sun. The whistle of the quail could be heard, and a startled jackrabbit rushes past, as if a greyhound was close upon his heels. All this, and more, too, can be seen at Blithedale, one of the sweetest spots in California, six miles from Saucelito, at the foot of Mount Tamalpais. It can be reached by the 8:45 a.m. or 5:00 p.m. boats for Saucelito, thence by stage.

This was written in the San Francisco News Letter and California Advertiser five years after Dr. John Cushing, a successful San Francisco homeopathic physician, came to southern Marin to homestead two pieces of property and to build on one of them a sanitorium, in 1873, which he named Blithedale.

In those days, Marin County was covered by twenty-one Mexican Land Grants, but between John Thomas Reed’s and William Richardson’s grants, Cushing located two pieces of government public land, totaling 342 acres. He filed a homestead on each piece, paying a fee of $10 each. Dr. John Cushing did not live to enjoy the Blithedale surroundings for long. He died there in 1879. After his death, the sanitorium was closed but, soon after, his widow, Harriet, and their son, Sidney, opened Blithedale as a resort. The Blithedale Hotel offered a full round of amusement for its patrons.

The Corte Madera Creek, then a large stream, was dammed to provide swimming and boating. It was called the Blithedale Dam and was large enough to accommodate row boats. Fishing was also popular, for it was a common sight in those days to see salmon swimming up stream and jumping the ladder, or steps, at the side of the dam on the hotel property. On festive occasions, Japanese paper lanterns, lighted with wax candles, were strung in the trees like jewels.

Blithedale enjoyed a good press. The pages of San Francisco Society Sections frequently mentioned Blithedale. Many tent spaces were rented from season to season and some of the cottages that were built at that time are still standing today. Also still standing today is the old mill house, used by Cushing’s Blithedale Hotel to cool the flax and raise the cream for butter. It was built from rocks and boulders out of the creek, using adobe as the mortar to hold them together.

The hotel was torn down in 1912 and the land subdivided into 70 "large" lots, according to the subdivision brochure. (It shows that at this time West Blithedale was called Cottage Avenue.

For those interested in genealogy, the Cushing family first came to America in 1638. Dr. John Cushing was born in Providence, Rhode Island, in 1822. In 1856, in San Francisco, he married Harriet Reed Barlow. Their children were Sidney Barlow, born March 8, 1857, and Marion, born September 10, 1861.

Both of Dr. Cushing’s children lived in San Rafael. Marion married Edward Grey Stetson and Sidney married Grace Eldridge. Her father was John O. Eldridge, who built the North Wagon Road to the top of Mt. Tamalpais. The Cussings had two children. Their son was named John for his grandfather, and Eleanor (Dolly) was born in San Rafael on May 9, 1899. On January 5, 1910, she married James Jenkins. The wedding was simple, in her father had passed away on September 9, 1909. For a wedding gift, her mother gave her a house on Eldridge, the same house that Senator S. J. Hayakawa lives in today.

BLITHEDALE, Dr. Cushing’s place, six miles from Saucelito, the best place for recreation, for convalescents, for ladies and children, in the State, 8:45 A.M. and 5:00 P.M. boat connects with stage for the place.

The road in front of the Blithedale Hotel. Note the steps that were used by people getting in and out of the old stage.

Sidney Cushing was known not only for his association with the Blithedale Hotel; he also pioneered and was first president of the Mill Valley and Mt. Tamalpais Scenic Railway. In addition, he was president of the San Rafael Gas and Electric Company.

The San Francisco Society Blue Books are a source of information about Blithedale. These books give the name of the family, the "at home day", and, if the family owned a country residence, it was listed.

The 1890 Blue Book lists seven country residences in Blithedale. A picture postcard stamped 1904 is obviously an advertisement for Blithedale, as it says the opening day is May 1 and gives advice on how to obtain accommodations. Another spells the name "Blythedale". Lacking a postmark, the card has no date, but the hillside above has numerous houses on it. The San Francisco Argonaut of 1906, after the Fire of April 18, advertised "a house above Blithedale for lease", as it was the custom for people who owned country homes to lease them to refugees of the San Francisco Fire. In the San Francisco Chronicle of 1910, the "Blithedale Hotel" is advertised "on the American Plan. Tents, cottages and rooms with electricity and bath, fifty-five minutes from San Francisco."

For years I had wondered why the area was called Blithedale, as any mention of the name always brought reference to Hawthorne’s novel "The Blithedale Romance" as the source of the name. Georg Parish, a historian and genealogist, once asked me a question, "Why did Dr. Cushing use the name of Hawthorne to name his place?" This triggered my research. Hawthorne (1804-64) was a famous personality. His writing in newspapers, magazines and his little recognition "The Scarlet Letter", which he joined at "Brook Farm", a century experiment in the 1840s.

In 1852, he published "The Blithedale Romance", in the intro
custom for people who owned country homes to lease them to refugees of the San Francisco Fire. In the San Francisco Chronicle of 1910, the "Blithedale Hotel" is advertised "on the American Plan. Tents, cottages and rooms with electricity and bath, forty-five minutes from San Francisco."

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Hawthorne was a life-long intimate friend of our 19th president, Franklin Pierce (1804-69). As a friend from college days, Hawthorne wrote a biography of Pierce in 1853, before Pierce was elected President. A one-term president (1853-57), Pierce appointed Caleb Cushing (1800-79) as his Attorney General. Cushing was a controversial figure, but he was famous in his time.

In 1873, when the Cushings came to Marin County, Caleb Cushing had published "The Treaty of Washington", a book concerning the Geneva Conference for the Alabama Claims. He had been one of the counsel of the United States at the Conference. That same year, 1873, he was appointed Minister to Spain. Curiously, that same year also saw twenty-one volumes of Hawthorne's writings published as a set. And this was the same year that Dr. John Cushing came to Marin County.

Below, Blithedale Hotel, showing portions of several guest cottages. There originally were tents to serve the patients at Dr. John Cushing's Sanitarium, as it was known. This photo taken approx. 1900.

Custom for people who owned country homes to lease them to refugees of the San Francisco Fire.
Blithedale guests costumed for a special evening's entertainment at the hotel... a Japanese theme it would appear.
Photo at left carries original inscription, "A quiet evening at Blithedale."

Below, The Blithedale Hotel and cottages in foreground (circa 1895). The second house from the left is "The Arches" at 95 Magee, built by Lovell White around 1890. Address of the Hotel is thought to be 205 West Blithedale Avenue.
This 1912 map shows the route of the mountain railroad crossing Throckmorton, through Blithedale Canyon, passing the Blithedale Hotel grounds and Redwood Lodge. Note that Blithedale Avenue stopped completely at the hotel grounds and Corte Madera was the "through" street. Beyond the hotel, Blithedale Avenue continued, but was called Cottage at that time. The heavy black line shows the railroad tracks. The Redwood Lodge and the Blithedale Hotel grounds are the white areas.

MILL VALLEY, MARIN COUNTY

Cushing's Subdivision of Blithedale

The beautiful valley known as the Blithedale Canyon, in which for forty years stood the famous old Blithedale Hotel, has been subdivided into seventy large building lots.

The old hotel has been razed, but a few of the cottages left to be sold with the lots on which they stood.

The whole tract lies to the southern exposure of the sun, is beautifully wooded and free from fog and wind, being sheltered by the surrounding hills and Mt. Tamalpais, of which most of the lots command superb views. Good roads have been built, the tract is sewered, water mains laid and the Electric Light and Telephone Companies are ready to furnish service.

Twenty local trains daily (fare five cents) with stations within five minutes' walk of any lot, run to Mill Valley and the depot of the North Western Pacific Railroad, whose fast electric trains connect half-hourly (during business hours) with Sausalito, San Rafael and San Francisco. The tract is within a few minutes' walk of the Mill Valley Post Office.

Terms of sale are very reasonable.

Ten per cent cash; balance in easy monthly payments

Possession given at once

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MILL VALLEY

Blithedale Hotel receipts to Mr. Adolph Sutro dated September 1892 show hotel board as $8.00 per week, horse board was $20.00 a month.

The "Lee Street Local" (photographed by Avenue houses are shown in background, service in 1905 between Throckmorton and Eldridge, King and Marsh Station.

The Abbey, bottom right, situated at 11 Marguerite, was a popular holiday retreat. C. House in 1900, it was destroyed by fire. The main building was a large, white, arches, somewhat resembling pagoda-type, cottages were built around the hotel and a six rooms (both and electricity included). Guests were welcomed by a local car at Mill Valley and Marsh Stations, the latter of the Abbey.
Bledale Canyon, set completely at grade continuing, Good Lodge and

division

Bledale Canyon, in which for a Hotel, has been subdivided
free of the cottage left to be
exposure of the sun, is
wood, being sheltered by the
side roof of the lot, command
the house is secured, water
where Companies are ready
the with stations within five
and the depot of the North
is train connect half-hourly
Robert and San Francisco.
the Mill Valley Post Office.
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division is a Good Buy

and the station apply to
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Making Scenic Railway

Bledale Hotel receipts to
Mr. Adolph Sutro dated September
1892 show hotel board as $8.00 per week.
Horse board was $20.00 a month.

The “Lee Street Local” (photographed below in 1930), Bayside Avenue houses are shown in background. The Motor Car #3 began service in 1905 between Throckmorton and Lee Street with stops at Eldridge, King and Marsh Stations.

The Abbey, bottom right, situated at Rowan Way and
Marguerite, was a popular holiday retreat. Built by Miss Abby
C. Hesse in 1900, it was destroyed by fire in 1929.
The main building was a large, white, two-story structure with
arches, somewhat resembling pagoda-type architecture. Guest
cottages were built around the hotel and varied in size from one to
six rooms (bath and electricity included). Later, a large recreation
hall was added, where parties were held every Saturday night.ear

Gall were welcomed by a local car which met all trains at
Mill Valley and Marsh Stations, the latter being within a few feet
of the Abbey.
Redwood Lodge, an 1890 Survivor

It was a busy day by Arroyo Corte Madera del Presidio in 1851. The loggers cut half a dozen big redwood trees and the teams of bullocks dragged them away to John Reed’s mill on Cascade Creek to be cut into beams and boards for the buildings in San Francisco.

A continent away, on the same day, in Cazenovia, New York, the Billings had a son. They named him George. George E. Billings came to San Francisco in 1868, where he worked at various jobs and finally at Hall Shipbuilding Yards. Then, in 1874, he wisely married the boss’s daughter, Susannah Maria Hall (whose middle name, by which she was always called, was pronounced as in the song, “They Called the Wind Maria”). In 1890, aware that the Tamalpais Land and Water Company was planning to conduct a land auction, Billings purchased in that auction four lots on Corte Madera Creek. He immediately began the construction of a summer home, where nearly 40 years earlier the loggers had cut and hauled away the big trees. They named their house “Redwood Lodge”. By this time, there were rings of young trees growing around the old stumps and the other redwoods had become giants in their own right.

By 1896, track for the Mt. Tamalpais Scenic Railway had been laid from the depot to the summit. The line ran behind and across the creek from Redwood Lodge, with a stop at the southeast corner of the property at Eldridge Avenue. To develop their garden, George Billings and Maria had a part of the creek diverted to form an island and a swimming pool. They built several graceful stone bridges across the creek and installed a tennis court. Tillicum Cottage (now 9 Eldridge) was built as a guest house for their young daughter, May, whose friends would come from San Francisco for the weekend. Later, a second
cottage called “Nixie”, after Billings’ yacht, was built. This house is now 178 Corte Madera Avenue.

Following the 1906 earthquake, the Billings left San Francisco and made Redwood Lodge their year-around home. May, their only child, married Roy Ward, who was on the Mill Valley Town Council for many years and was twice Mayor, in 1922-24 and 1932-34. The Wards had four children, and there are three surviving daughters, Marion, Jean, and Susannah. Redwood Lodge and its gardens were so loved by these granddaughters that Billings built the “Live Doll House” for them, now 144 Corte Madera Avenue.

Today, Jean Ward Keller and her husband, Colonel Reeve Keller, live at Redwood Lodge. Time has changed things but has not diminished its beauty. The tennis court no longer has famous players competing in tournaments; the creek does not have the same flow of water, so there is no natural swimming pool, and the Mountain Railroad is just a memory. But the redwood trees stand even more majestically as guardians of Redwood Lodge and, inside, the fine redwood paneling still shines with a luster that time cannot dull.

Jean Keller can recall a flood of happy memories of life at Redwood Lodge. They had a boat in the swimming pool that could be rocked back and forth until it filled with water and sank! Her grandfather used to pretend to stumble and would fall into the pool with his tennis clothes on! The ice cream wagon would come up Corte Madera with its bell ringing; Jean’s grandfather would give her a dollar to buy cones for all the players and spectators at the tennis court. The Blithedale Hotel was in operation and its guests would come down to Redwood Lodge to see the tennis matches and have the sandwiches and punch provided by the Billings.

Jean also remembers that in 1919 the Boy Scouts needed a meeting place, so George and Maria Billings deeded the Boy Scouts of Mill Valley a fine building at 177 East Blithedale that at that time was a laundry. It was converted to a meeting hall and today “Scout Hall” is cared for by a Board of Trustees and is still a focal point for Scout, Cub, and Brownie activities.

George and Maria Billings, thank you for Scout Hall and for Redwood Lodge and its wonderful memories.
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