MARIN CALLS FOR HELP AS NEW BLAZE PERILS COUNTY

When the Fire God's Legions Marched Across Marin County

1 Dead, 9 Hurt In S. F. Blast

Blast Wreaks
Los Angeles Grain

California's

Flames Sweep
On; Loss Set
At 3 Millions

MILL VALLEY WILL REBUILD IMMEDIATELY

The Injured

Homes Burned

Phone Girls Are Praised

Bulletin Starts Relief Fund

Mill Valley Historical Quarterly
Fall, 1979
Editor's Note

Perhaps one of the best rewards that will come from publishing the Mill Valley Historical Quarterly will be the unexpected new information that turns up about the town's history. The short notes, phone calls, and other assorted leads we've been getting are invaluable.

By far the most interesting letter to the editor came from Inez Mary Purser, a direct descendant of John Thomas Reed. Her covering letter was congratulatory. She enclosed a spirited refutation, however, concerning the comparative historical importance assigned Reed — her great-grandfather — in one of the articles.

Her letter follows.

Jeremy Gorman, Editor

The Mill Valley Historical Society is very grateful to the Mill Valley Library for its contribution of many resource materials used in this issue.

LETTERS BACK

Reed Descendent Rebuttal

When my great-grandfather John Thomas Reed built the mill, after which Mill Valley is named, he thought he was building on his own property. In those days the lines indicating land divisions were designated by natural landmarks; for instance a tree, knoll, small stream or creek bed were often agreed upon.

Reed certainly didn't need to land-grab, as he owned leagues of land at the time. He constructed the mill for his own use; primarily for lumber for his own home which was made of wood and adobe.

There were people who acquired land by the "grab" method. They were called "squatters" and if they could get a shack put together and complete a fence around a piece of property, it became theirs. This happened to property owned by my mother in Mill Valley. Before her brother and cousins could frighten the man off with guns, he had the fence around it and could claim ownership. Some men who later became respected citizens in the town, did exactly this.

My Mother was John Reed's grand-daughter and told me many true stories of events before and during her lifetime. She was born in Mill Valley, as I was, and always interested in its improvement. She was one of a small group of women who conceived the idea of The Outdoor Art Club to preserve the natural beauty of the area. She owned original shares in the club and would have been a charter member had she not been away on her honeymoon at the time the charter was drawn up and signed.

John Reed, Captain Richardson, General Vallejo and Timoteo Murphy were all good friends and big men. Big in ideas and accomplishments. Read ran a boat from Saucelito to San Francisco for his own use and business transactions. As an accommodation to people who wanted to cross the bay, he would take them as passengers and let them pay some token amount and because of this he was said to have run the first ferry boat, though he didn't do it for this purpose. Actually, I suppose he did run the first ferry as so-called historians have pointed out.

Read was known and respected for his integrity, kindness and generosity. He was liked and trusted, even by the Indians, whom he befriended and had cared for when they became ill or needed help. In the short span of his lifetime, he accomplished a great many constructive things because he was an industrious person. He died when he was only thirty-eight years of age.

Read heirs have since given property for railroads, electric towers and roads for the improvement of Marin County. My great-aunt Lita Throckmorton gave land to the Northwestern Pacific Railroad and for years had a lifetime "pass" on their line in recognition of her generosity. This was the tradition of our Reed heritage.

Inez Mary Purser

Firefighters tried backfiring on Magee street, but this failed too. Dynamiting homes to check the spread of the fire was considered, but the idea was quickly discouraged by San Francisco firefighters.

The fire was spreading down middle ridge toward the center of town, while its flanks burned towards Throckmorton and Cascade canyons. One motorist fleeing the fire came down Summit onto Magee in his car at high speed. The car went out of control and crashed, catching fire. Firefighters put the fire out, but it flared up again later, setting fire to the brush. This fire burned five structures before it burned itself into the main fire coming down the ridge.

By 9:30 p.m. the fire was on the west edge of town. Time had come for the last stand.

All equipment was placed at the edge of town as the last line of defense. At 11:00 p.m. the town seemed doomed to the onrushing flames. Fire had reached a large house on Alcatraz, 100 yards from the fire station. Suddenly the wind veered to the southeast, pushing the fire back on itself. The town was saved. The fire was diverted up Cascade canyons and along the southern slopes of Tamalpais.

The fire burned uncontrolled for three days, until July 5, when it was announced that the Mill Valley fire was out. West Point Inn had been threatened, and it had burned to within 100 feet of the Tavern of Tamalpais.

In the end, 117 homes were destroyed and City Assessor Failly set the damage at $1,045,000. The fire burned an area of approximately 2500 acres. It could happen again.
Fire is no stranger to Mount Tamalpais or Mill Valley. Fire is as much a part of the natural process as are the winter rains, the summer fog. It is probable that fire has visited some portion of Mt. Tamalpais every thirty to fifty years throughout history. It is simply one of the elements of nature.

Fire is a major factor affecting the plant community, because only those plants which are able to recover or to reproduce between recurring fires have survived to members of those particular species areas of Mill Valley and the slopes. Because the weather in this area being a Mediterranean climate, one periods of heat or drought accompany summer months, plant life must accordingly. Such a climate as ours produces conditions ideal for fires. Many of us are deceived by the rich green plants and trees surrounding our homes and carpeting the slopes of Tamalpais. However moisture-laden and fire resistant they may appear, these plants contain a very low moisture content and a very high oil content — fire fodder.

The "29" fire was not a large one in comparison with some that have occurred in our area, but the 117 homes it destroyed, the personal property it consumed, the grief and the fear that it brought, made it a monster of its time.

Around the end of May, Hugo Legler, veteran fire lookout for the Tamalpais Forest Fire District, opened the lookout for the 1929 fire season. Legler, then in his seventies, had witnessed many seasons from the lookout, perched on the east peak of Mt. Tamalpais. On July 23, 1929, he reported and watched the famous Tavern of Tamalpais burn to the ground. Two months later, he saw Marin's largest fire burn from Ignacio to the slopes of Tamalpais — in all, 100 square miles of grass, brush, timber and homes. On July 2, 1929, Legler was to witness yet another of Marin's historic fire catastrophes. About 2:00 p.m., Legler spotted a fire starting up near Northwestern's power station in Alto. Legler quickly notified Chief E. B. Gardner of the Tamalpais Forest Fire District, and a crew was dispatched. The Mill Valley Fire Department also was notified, and it responded with a fire crew in its De Martini hose truck. The hose truck — or wagon — carried hose, fire fighting tools, and the firemen it contained neither water nor pump. Mill Valley's newer 1924 American La France fire truck remained at the station in town.

At 2:15 p.m., Legler observed yet another fire — this one at St. Vincent's, near what is now Marinwood, and a second crew from the Forest Fire District was dispatched.

Then, while watching the progress of the fire in Alto, Legler noticed a column of smoke rising from the area or canyon between Rafton White's home, the Garden of Allah, and the railroad grade. Legler hurriedly telephoned the Mill Valley Fire Department: "There seems to be a fire near the Rafton White place."

We'll never know who received that call in the Mill Valley station, nor is it likely that we will ever understand the real cause of the fire itself.

Cliftoon Thoney sat munching in his kitchen at home on Sunnyvale Avenue, having been appointed Fire Chief of Mill Valley only the day before (July 1st, 1929). Having been relayed this first word of the fire, Thoney raced back to the station. He and his men tried to determine if the fire was inside or outside the city limits. (A fire bell was rung for outside fires, and a siren used for calls inside the town limits.) The fire bell was rung.

Jean Barnard's mother was
probably the second person to report the fire when the gardener and his helper told them of the fire. They were visiting at Ralston White's at the time. This call convinced Chief Thoney that the fire was close to or inside the city limits, and he turned on the siren to get all the help he could. The siren called in Mill Valley's volunteer firemen. Someone was sent to bring back the hose truck from Alto, while Thoney and his men raced to the fire at Ralston White's. The siren arrived, found the fire, and water was brought to the fire lines by Red Cross volunteers.

Volunteer firemen began arriving, a "hose lay" from a nearby hydrant was made, and water was put on the fire again. The fire was beyond their ability to control, a call was sent out for help from neighboring cities. The towns responded to the call for help — Corte Madera, Larkspur, Kentfield, Ross, San Rafael, San Anselmo and Sausalito all sent men and equipment. The wind had been a warm breeze that day, but now increased in velocity, blowing down the mountain side fanning the fire. It was moving fast, and it was headed toward Summit Avenue and Blithedale, where many homes lay directly in its path. A call was made to San Francisco for help. San Francisco Fire Department sent two engines and two chemical wagons. These were met by a special ferry and brought to Sausalito, then led to Mill Valley by police escort.

Despite heroic efforts by the firefighters, the fire was fast devouring homes and moving toward the center of town. Residents on middle ridge were told to grab what possessions they could and leave the area. Downtown Mill Valley took on the appearance of a refugee camp. Later, special trains were run to Sausalito so the homeless could stay with friends or relatives in the city.

The Red Cross set up an aid station in Scout Hall to care for the many injured fighting the fire. Injuries were cared for by Dr. R.O. Dufficy, coffee and sandwiches were given to the hungry, and food was brought to the fire lines by Red Cross volunteers.

Pacific Gas & Electric workers shut off gas lines and electrical service in the areas affected by the fire. The Marin Municipal Water District gathered a large force of men to fight the portion of the fire that was eating its way up the slope of the watershed on Tamalpais. One crew of firefighters being carried up the mountain on the railway had a narrow escape when the engine jumped the track. Another became surrounded by the fire. The men grabbed what tools they could and fought their way to safety. The engine and car were destroyed by the flames.

The American Legion had 100 volunteers at work on the fire. The Army sent soldiers from Fort Baker, and later these were joined by others from the Presidio. Twenty-five men were sent by the Coast Guard.

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Memories of the 1929 Mill Valley Fire

Interview with Miss Nora Evans, Mill Valley resident from 1913-1969

In 1919 we were planning to make the Sierra Club trip. We had already sent all our gear on ahead, except for our boots. On July 1st we came over to the Mill Valley cabin (400 Ralston) for a few days...we were going to do some hiking to get in trim.

On July 2nd I had planned a party for my mother. I was going to have lunch for them. We had neither gas nor electricity. We cooked on a coal stove, but I very often broiled my meat in the fireplace. The morning of July 2nd I looked out and said, “I am not going to light a fire in the fireplace today. I’ve never seen such a dry and windy day.”

So I cooked the chops on the coal oil stove. As we were finishing lunch, we looked out and saw huge clouds of smoke. We said, “What is that? There must be a fire somewhere.”

Two friends and I went over to the Garden of Allah. There we could see that a fire had started on the mountain...either from a spark from the old railroad train, or possibly from some very dry grass that had been heated under glass that had been blown out. We found Ralston (White) at home, with Alphonse who worked on the place and a Japanese man named Okama. Their house was concrete with a tile roof, so it wasn’t in much danger. They were trying to keep the fire from the barn and see that the horses were all right.

As we came up to the house, the curtains were blowing to the outside so Marion Craig went in and closed all the windows. Ruth (Mrs. White) and her twin sister, Dorothy Symmes, had gone down town. Ruth’s niece, Jean Symmes (now Mrs. John Barnard of Ralston Ave.) was frightened and I said, “Come back to the cabin with me. You can’t see the flames from there. When it’s over I’ll bring you back.”

Fortunately for us, Jean’s mother called shortly after we got to our cabin and said “The wind changed. We’re driving out. Bring Jean to the head of the trail.”

I didn’t want to get Mother and her friends excited but I did say that we leave. My mother’s cousin picked up a box of candy. Major Loundes saved his flask (this was in ’29, you know — prohibition days.) Luckily I rescued two beautiful lmar bowls of mother’s...and our Sierra Club boots. This was all we saved.

Then I went up on the roof with a hose, but they kept honking and honking and saying “Come on.”

When I got to the oak the flames were not more than three or four hundred feet behind us.

We stayed at the Alta Mira Hotel in Sausalito that night. We could see the fire burning all night. The next morning we went back to look at the cabin. There was nothing there but ashes. The ashes were white, not black. The fire had been that intense.

Newspaper article of the day...

Millionaires and shop clerks worked tirelessly side by side haing the great roasting furnace which threatened destruction to the thousands of residents of the city during the night.

Covered with soot and dirt at the end of 10 minutes, neither looked nor cared if they had 5 cents in the world as long as the fire leaped upon them.

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REMINISCENCES

Interview with Clinton L. Thoney, Fire Chief at time of 1929 fire, 1970

The Fire Department got a phone call at 2:10 on July 2nd. I was home for lunch at the time, but other firemen got the call and they called me. I said there was a fire right above Ralston White's property. It wasn't in the fire district at that time, generally the fire bell for any outside fires, instead of the siren. The siren was only for Mill Valley calls inside the town limits.

Just as I got to the firehouse I got another call that the fire was at Ralston White's. Instead of ringing the fire bell then, I turned on the siren to get all the help we could. I knew if it was that close to his place, it was coming down into the Mill Valley limits.

At that time there were only three regular paid members of the Fire Department and we had a 1923 American LaFrance 1000-gallon pumper. We also had an old DeMartin truck that was just a horse wagon with no pumper on it. The old truck was over at Alto at a fire.

The new truck went out as soon as we got the call and we sent one of the fellows over to Alto to bring the old truck back so it could be here to protect Mill Valley.

There were a good 1000 square feet already burning when we got to the fire. When I saw it, I knew the only thing we could do was try to hold it until we got help...There was between a 35 and 40-miles-an-hour breeze blowing. And it was hot, too. Really hot.

There was a hydrant system, but no water. We pumped for maybe 20 minutes and pumped the lines dry. We could get mud out of them and that's all. Our tank ran out of water and we had to come down to the lower section of town and fill up again. The LaFrance would pump 1000 gallons a minute but the tank would carry only 200 gallons. We pumped all the water out of the tank, then we pumped the swimming pool dry (at the Garden of Allah). Then after that we had to come down into a lower section to fill up the tank with water.

While we were still pumping our first load of water my brother, Vollmar, one of the engineers for the mountain railroad, brought a crew of men up to work. We had commandeered the mountain train right away — engines and work cars to carry equipment. We told them there was a fire up above the ridge. So they brought a flatcar down and loaded on men, shovels, brush hooks and everything they needed. The water tanks on the railroad engine carried 1000 gallons, so they used the pumper off the railroad engine to pump that water. It took them about 15 or 20 minutes to get up to Ralston White's from town. And then the track was about 1000 feet from the house.

The next day people collected their kids and took them off — back to their houses or relatives or what. That was one of the devastating Mill Valley fires.

Interview with Margaret Wosser Dowd, 1968

The day of the fire my mother had gone to San Francisco to the Fox Theatre that had just opened. When she got out of the theatre there was a newshoey crying the headlines, "Mill Valley in flames." Mother said to her friends, "Oh, that's ridiculous. They exaggerate these things so." Coming across the bay on the ferry, the closer she got to Marin County, the more smoke she could see. Cinders were blowing out onto the bay, the wind was so strong.

We lived at what is now 121 West Blithedale. They had stopped people from going up the canyon, but when Jimmy Jenkins, who lived up the road, saw my mother, he said "You can go through." When she got to the house, she found that everything had been taken.

She was relieved, you can be sure, to find out that it was my husband who had gone up there and taken everything out of the house. The fire was burning right across from us, down to the little trail that runs above Corte Maderas Avenue. The fire was way down there. Many people lost just about everything, but our house did not burn.

The day of the '29 fire I had come over to Mill Valley to stay with dad. My sister Ruth (Mrs. William Marcus) telephoned, "You'd better come fast. There's a terrible fire. I've got to get the children out, and I'm having trouble with Gino." (The Marcus' houseman). I got into the car and promptly ran into a police block. They didn't want to let me through, but I told them I was going after Ruth's children. When I got up to their road I found that Gino, being very helpful, had filled the driveway with their caged birds so the roadway was blocked. I staggered down the hill with the bird cages, picked up the kids, and brought them home.

We spent the rest of the day going to the depot, picking up kids and bringing them home. I don't know how many we had that night. I finally looked around the big cable, and there were dozens of kids there.

Interview with Grace Finn Wellman — 1977

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She lived at what is now 121 West A Street. They had stopped people going up the canyon, but when we got to the ferry, when Jenkins, who lived up the canyon, she said, “You have to come through.” When she got to the ferry, she asked that everything be taken. She was relieved, you can be sure, that it was my husband and children went up there and taken out of the house. The fire was raging right across from us, up the little trail that runs down Madera Avenue. The way down there. Many lost just about everything, but she did not burn.

Interview with Helen Thompson Dreyfus, 1973

When the fire broke out we were all packed and ready to leave for Europe. I was in Diablo, saying goodbye to friends, when somebody called and said, “The whole of Mill Valley is burning. Don’t come home.” Of course I had to come home, because my family was there.

It was a terrifying sight. From where we lived, over on the west ridge, you could see it (the fire) leaping from house to house across this whole hill. The houses went worse than the trees, you know, because of the dry shingles.

Did you ever hear about Mrs. Menis’ unfortunate experience? She was a contemporary of my mother’s. She had bought a lot of very beautiful furniture which had not yet been unpacked from its crates. When the fire came whirling down the hill toward them (Magee at Tamalpais) it was obvious that the houses were going fast. She got her husband and son to move all the furniture out of the road so that if the house went the new furniture wouldn’t. Contrarywise, the furniture went and the house didn’t. It was always locked upon as one of the saddest stories of the fire.

My father made my brother, my mother and cousin get into the car with all our luggage, our steamer trunks and things packed for Europe and he sent them down to Sausalito to get away from the fire, saying he thought he ought to “stay and keep an eye on things.” They spent an uncomfortable night sleeping in the car in Sausalito and came back the next day to discover that dad had done only that — he had sat on the roof with a pair of binoculars and watched the fire. He hadn’t gone to fight it, he hadn’t even damped down the roof. My, my mother was angry. She had had to sit up all night. He had gone to bed when it was clear the fire wasn’t coming our way.

Interview with Tommy Bickerstaff, 1970

I was driving up Marguerite, right where Elaine takes off. The fire was coming down that canyon just to beat hell. There are two houses right there, and I could hear a baby crying in one of them. I called out “Is there anybody in there?” Nobody answered so I said, “I’m going to go up and look.” Nobody was there. I went through the rooms and there was a kid in a crib. I picked him up and went down and gave him to Mrs. L.S. Jones. I said “Take this baby.” I had other places to go. (delivering food and hot coffee to the firefighters.)

Later on I found out it was the Bufano baby. Mrs. Bufano was renting that cottage. She had been married to Benny Bufano (noted San Francisco sculptor) but they were divorced. The cottage didn’t have a phone and she had gone next door to phone. She came back and her baby was gone. She came running down into town just crazy. “The baby’s gone, the baby’s gone.” George Engels said “He’s safe. Tommy brought him down. Mrs. Jones has the baby at her house.”

Interview with Frank Canepa, founder of the Mill Valley Market, 1977

The day I was supposed to open my store, the fire broke out on Mt. Tamalpais. I was in the city that night (of July 2, 1929) when I see in the paper that Mill Valley’s on fire. I said “My gosh, that’s all you need!” I was half my stuff in the store and half loaded on a little truck — I didn’t know what to do.

I came over by boat and by train, about 8 or 9 o’clock in the morning. As I arrived at the depot, all of Mill Valley was covered with smoke. There was a delegation at the train to pick everybody up. They said to me, “You’ve got to go fight the fire.” I said, “Jeez, I’ve got on a new suit.” The man said, “I don’t care. You’ve got to go fight the fire.”

Women were making sandwiches. They got me up the Cascade with a hoe. You can imagine! We were a bunch of amateurs. We knew nothing about fighting fire.

I remember Tony Arrigo — used to have barbershop here. It was the first time I met him. We were pulling the hose. He said, “Who are you?” I said, “Frank Canepa.” He said, “Italiano! My name’s Tony Arrigo.”
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