Celebrating Marin’s Hotels and Resorts

Ancha Vista
Liberty Ranch
Tocaloma Hotel
Bon Air Hotel
Blithedale Hotel
Pastoris
Hotel Rafael
Nicasio Hotel
The Inns of Mt. Tamalpais
Marshall Hotel
Black Point Inn
The Marin History Museum

Founded in 1935, the Marin History Museum celebrates the traditions of innovation and creativity of the people of Marin County. Through exhibitions and educational programs, the Museum inspires honor for the past, an understanding of the present and an imagination of the future.

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Collections & Research Center

The Marin History Museum collects and preserves a wide range of artifacts, photographs and archival materials chronicling Marin County’s rich and diverse history. In total, the Museum cares for over 25,000 artifacts and 200,000 photographs in the Craemer Family Collections & Research Facility in Novato. Objects in the collection are conserved for their historical and educational relevance and serve as the cornerstone of the Museum’s exhibitions.

This facility also houses the Museum’s Research Library where visitors may research any aspect of Marin’s history. The Research Library contains rare manuscripts, maps, newspapers, directories, ephemera and a reference collection of over 1,000 books.

To make an appointment, email research@marinhistory.org or call 415-382-1182

From the Editor:

The writers had such fun with this bulletin!

There were so many stories to choose from. As articles were written, several themes emerged. The development of railroad lines influenced where hotels were located, as success depended on the ease of transportation for visitors. Consequently, many hotels and resorts were near train depots or ferry landings. Secondly, almost all were destroyed completely or partially by fire. Some were rebuilt; others just faded into history.

And finally, Marin County has been a magnet for visitors from far and wide for almost all of its history.
Dear Friends,

We are excited to share our Spring 2021 Bulletin with you, all about Marin’s most fascinating and fabled resorts and hotels. We hope the stories and photographs in these pages spark your curiosity and imagination. Thank you to our valiant writers and to our board member extraordinaire, Ann Batman, for putting it all together.

Amid the pandemic, we are making every effort to stay in touch. We continue to communicate with our growing number of followers on Facebook and Instagram (@marinhistorymuseum) through creative daily content by our fabulous Lane Dooling. Thank you for the conversation and for sharing your memories with us! Our monthly e-newsletters with fresh articles to read, historical trivia, and community events of interest are now reaching well over 2,000 people.

Our popular Speaker Series has continued monthly via Zoom, hosted by Marcie Miller and facilitated by Carol Gordon. We have enjoyed connecting our audience with stories from our treasured network of local historians and researchers. Thank you to everyone who tuned in for our virtual book launch of *Journal Across the Plains, 1852* in November and purchased a copy. We still have inventory ready to ship and ordering is a snap through our website.

Although we are still closed for in-person research appointments, MHM continues to meet personal, classroom, and homework research needs remotely. From Marin’s indigenous people and founding pioneers to local neighborhoods and family histories, MHM remains an incredibly valuable local resource for history. Please send your queries to research@marinhistory.org.

And lastly, as we begin to see the light at the end of quarantine, MHM is looking for ways to record and preserve our collective experience for future generations. Please consider donating any Marin County-related Covid-19 materials (objects, photos, journals, flyers, posters, audio/video recordings, etc.) to the Marin History Museum. Please contact Heather Powell, MHM Collections Manager, at heather@marinhistory.org to arrange a donation.

Thank you for your continued membership through this difficult year. Our appreciation for our donors has deepened further through this pandemic. MHM has big plans for the coming year that we can’t wait to share with you soon! In the meantime, please visit our updated website, enjoy our digitized collections and let us know how we’re doing.

All the best,

Al Boro, Board President

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From the 1890s to the 1930s, San Anselmo was a vacation destination for many people in the Bay Area. The town's location along the route of the North Coast Pacific Railroad (later the Northwestern Pacific) and the mild sunny weather drew people for weekend outings and longer summer vacations. San Anselmo was described by a San Anselmo Herald reporter as "one great playground adapted for young and old where it is impossible to think too much of business and where health and pleasure walk hand-in-hand."

Many visitors found campsites along San Anselmo Creek, while others chose to stay at one of several hotels in town. The largest hotel was the Ancha Vista (Broad View). It was situated on the eastern slope of Red Hill with a magnificent view of Bald Hill and Mt. Tamalpais.

In 1897 the property was purchased by John and Pauline Richards of Sausalito. Soon after, the Richards leased it to Mrs. William F. Morris, who opened it as a boarding house. In the summer of 1900, the house was full and tents were erected on the grounds to accommodate extra guests.

Dave Davis and his wife Fannie, natives of England, took over management of the hotel and then purchased it from the Richards in 1911. Many improvements were made. The hotel advertised beautifully-furnished open air bedrooms with electric lights and running water. A special feature was the availability of poultry every day in the dining room.

A large natural spring on the grounds was found to have "curative" properties with rich concentrations of lithia and magnesia. The Ancha Vista management promoted the mineral springs in advertisements as a cure for uric acid ailments.

There were rooms in the main hotel and cottages for 150 guests and expansive grounds with plenty of shade. Rates were $2 to $3 per day. In June 1915, the San Anselmo Herald reported that the Ancha Vista was doing a flourishing business; it was in close proximity to the municipal dance platform and jitney service was provided.

The hotel seems to have prospered for many years and then waned in popularity as a vacation destination. The cottages were abandoned and boarders were taken in. After Dave Davis died in 1929, Fannie defaulted on the mortgage payments and was delinquent in paying taxes. The property was sold in a trustee's sale in 1934. The hotel and cottages may have burned to the ground sometime after the sale, but no historical record has been found to support this. The Guy W. Jenness Mortuary, the predecessor of Chapel of the Hills, moved to the Red Hill Avenue location in 1937.

By Judy Coy

A previous version of this article appeared in the printed edition of the Bulletin without proper attribution.

Photo Source: Postcard for the Ancha Vista Hotel c. 1908, MHM Collection.
Below the waters of Alpine Lake lie the remains of Liberty Ranch, a popular resort for nearly half a century. In times of drought, the foundations can still be seen in Liberty Gulch, the northwestern arm of the lake.

Vincent Liberty was born in Canada in 1836 and came here in the gold rush. In 1866 he married Mary Jane Hancorn and they started a family: Elodia in 1867, Vincent in 1868, and Leland in 1875.

The Libertys leased a 1,000-acre dairy ranch in Lagunitas Valley. They grazed cattle on the meadows around Little Carson Falls and lowered the milk cans to the ranch on a sledge track (now the Old Sled Trail). They then hauled the milk to San Rafael. In 1875, the North Pacific Coast Railroad built a line through Fairfax, and the family could haul their milk to the station there, a considerably shorter distance.

But the biggest impact on the ranch came in 1878, when the county built a new road from downtown San Rafael to Bolinas, right past the front gate of Liberty Ranch. A stagecoach line was established. Liberty Ranch was roughly midway between San Rafael and Bolinas, and it made a convenient place to break the three-hour drive. Vincent built several cabins, advertising “Nice rooms and good table board can be had at the Liberty Ranch on the Bolinas Road. Boarders accommodated by the day, week, or month.”

Liberty’s became a destination, with sportsmen coming over from the city, renting horses to roam the hills in search of deer, lions, and bears, which were still very plentiful. Families enjoyed the fishing, swimming, riding and hiking. The Libertys were prospering but then tragedy struck.

On January 12, 1878, their oldest son Vincent, nine years old, went to Anderson’s slaughter house in San Rafael. As he walked above the vats of boiling water where the carcasses were cleaned, his foot slipped and he fell into the water and was badly scalded. He died the following morning.

In October 1885, a fire broke out in the Liberty ranch house. The Marin Journal reported: Liberty Burned Out.—Wednesday last week the mountain home of Mr. Vincent Liberty, seven miles from San Rafael on the road to Bolinas, was destroyed by fire. The fire spread so rapidly that very little was saved. The barn caught fire, and Liberty only saved his horses by bursting the side out. His house was a favorite resort for a great many city people, and he is as widely known and liked as any man in the county.

Continued on p. 17
Just before Sir Francis Drake Blvd. climbs over the steep hill to Olema, Lagunitas Creek makes a sharp turn north to wind its way around the Olema Grade to Pt Reyes and Tomales Bay. It was at that location in the 1870s that the small hamlet of Tocaloma began to grow. Swiss immigrant Giuseppe Codoni had purchased over 600 acres in the area from Giovanni Giacomini and expanded the dairy operations there. When the North Pacific Coast Railroad began operations in the mid 1870s, Tocaloma became a station stop along the line. It was conveniently situated at the junction of the San Rafael to Olema Stagecoach Road and the railroad line running between Sausalito and the timber lands and dairies of Marin and Sonoma.

In 1879, John Lycurgus built the first hotel on the site across Lagunitas Creek from Codoni’s Ranch. The hotel catered to hunters, fisherman, hikers and campers who wanted to escape the city, and its often fog-shrouded neighborhoods. Lycurgus sold the hotel to another proprietor in 1882 who subsequently lost it in an 1885 fire: an event that would be a reoccurring theme for the Tocaloma Hotel. In 1889, French-born hotel keeper, John Bertrand, constructed a much grander hotel, pictured above, that had more than 40 rooms, a dancehall, billiard room, banquet room, croquet grounds, tent-cabins, and outdoor swings and hiking paths that invited guests to enjoy the surrounding environs. By the 1890s, Bertrand’s Hotel, as it came to be known, was a popular resort for travelers on the rail and stage lines and as a destination for vacationers, sportsmen, bicyclists and campers. Trains ran two or thre times a day, and travelers could reach Tocaloma from San Francisco in little more than two hours via the rail and ferry service from Sausalito. By the mid 1890s Bertrand had also purchased the Azalea Hotel at nearby Camp Taylor, another popular resort. Advertisements for the resorts touted the fine cuisine, sunny climate and fantastic fishing and hunting opportunities in and around Tocaloma. A 1902 piece recounted how one, Leon Jessu, caught 172 trout on the opening day of the fishing season between Camp Taylor and Tocaloma! The hotel was also a favorite stop for the many bicycling clubs of the era including the Bay City Wheelman, Pacific Cycling Club and the Camera Club Cyclists.

The hotel was bought by noted San Francisco restaurateur Caesar Ronchi in early 1913. He continued providing fine dining and luxurious accommodations to his guests. Within a few years the Tocaloma Hotel was also catering to early motorists traveling the improved roadway and rebuilt bridges between Fairfax and Olema. Tragedy struck the hotel once again in the winter of 1916 when it was destroyed by a fire that started in a defective kitchen flue. Just a few months before, the long-standing Azalea Hotel had also succumbed to flames at Camp Taylor. Mr. Ronchi built a much smaller tavern the following year that was a popular roadhouse throughout the 1920s and 1930s, providing, by some accounts, bootlegged liquor to patrons during Prohibition, but the days of grand hotel living in Tocaloma had passed into history.

By Scott Fletcher

Photo Source: MHM Collection
As Marin opens its brand new state-of-the-art MarinHealth Medical Center (formerly Marin General Hospital) you might be surprised to learn that a century ago this site was home to a swanky summer resort where guests enjoyed fine drink and dining, dance and song.

The Escalle vineyards and picnic grounds north of Larkspur were developed in the late 1800s leading to an influx of small houseboats and arks which lined the southern banks of Corte Madera Creek and took advantage of “saltwater bathing,” mild climate and natural attractions of the area.

In 1901, capitalizing on the popularity of this summer destination, Mr. and Mrs. John E. Manlove built a spectacular resort on 22 acres on the north side of the creek in the former location of the Biggins and Prunty brickyard. They named it Hotel Bon Air, very likely taking the name from the legendary Bon Air hotels of Richmond, Virginia and Augusta, Georgia.

This impressive four-story, 50-room resort cost $80,000 ($2.5 million in today’s dollars) to construct and boasted two shingled towers, a wide verandah with expansive views of the creek and Mt. Tamalpais, saltwater swimming pool (the first pool in Marin County), bowling alley, dance hall, gambling room, riding stable and six guest cottages on the hill in back. Most guests reached the hotel via a boardwalk from Escalle station that led to a private drawbridge which crossed the creek. The Hotel Bon Air formally opened on May 15, 1902 and was first class in every way; fishing, boating, horseback riding, swimming, well-groomed grounds and beautiful drives. Special events and dances drew large crowds including a July Fourth 1902 “Grand Ball” and an “illuminated water carnival” in 1906 where thousands of Japanese lanterns reportedly lit up the resort, arks, nearby homes and the entire Escalle complex. It even included a festive parade of more than one hundred boats and a military band on a float which serenaded the hotel guests as it went up and down sleepy Corte Madera Creek.

The Manloves, who had other business interests, traded the hotel around 1911. Despite some improvements by the new owners/operators times were tough and swimming in the “slough” lost popular appeal. No longer attracting large crowds or enough guests to make it a viable investment, the hotel closed, bank foreclosure soon followed which included never-to-materialize plans to demolish this once grand and lively hotel.

The Archdiocese of San Francisco, owner of the surrounding Greenbrae Ranch, bought the resort property in 1918. Louis Dell’Era and his family resided at the empty property as caretakers until the Hotel Bon Air burned around 1923. The site remained vacant until its purchase in the mid-1940s by Niels Schultz and the subsequent construction of Marin General Hospital in 1952.

By Alice Tanner

Photo Source: MHM Collection
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In 1873, Dr. John Cushing, a San Francisco homeopathic physician who was “done to death” with his hectic medical practice moved with his family onto a homestead in Blithedale Canyon at the base of Mount Tamalpais. There he founded Blithedale, which began as a sanitarium — a rural resort where he and guests could relax and restore health in a splendid and tranquil outdoor setting. Over time, cottages were built by the doctor’s friends and patients who frequented his resort.

When Dr. Cushing died in 1879, his widow Harriet and their son Sydney re-established Blithedale as a hotel, the first in Mill Valley. Advertisements from this time announced “Furnished cottages, rooms single and en suite. Tents on raised platforms, furnished complete, electric lighted, with shower baths. Tennis, bowling, billiards, saddle horses. Convenient summer home for San Francisco businessmen with their families ... Perfect climate; no fogs; first class service; moderate rates.” By 1880, it had become one of the most popular hotels in Northern California. Guests were originally met by a four-in-hand stage. By 1889, guests arrived at the Eastland/Mill Valley depot, not far from the hotel.

Over the next four decades, what would become known as The Blithedale Hotel flourished, with guests enjoying fishing, hunting, hiking, swimming, horseback riding and “lantern-lit” parties. Mrs. Dollie Jenkins — Dr. Cushing’s granddaughter — remembered spending summers at Blithedale in the 1890s. In a Marin Independent Journal article on April 18, 1959, she described frequent amateur theatricals and fancy dress parties with creative homemade costumes.

She recalled “the four-horse stage which on rare occasions she was allowed to drive. It met the incoming trains at the station in Mill Valley and was always so full of children enjoying the ride.” Other fond memories included “slides down slippery slopes of brown grass in homemade wooden sleds” and expeditions to the Old Mill, daily horseback rides, picnics at Big Lagoon (today’s Muir Beach) and trips to the top of Mt. Tam via the Mt. Tamalpais Scenic Railway.

After several decades as a known destination for San Francisco society and beyond, the hotel experienced a decline in business and ceased operations in 1912. The main hotel building was demolished and the land was subdivided into 70 lots. Some lots included Blithedale hotel cottages. The main hotel building stood near today’s 195 West Blithedale Avenue.

By Lane Dooling

Photo Source: Color postcard of the Blithedale Hotel c. 1908, MHM Collection.
If you head west on the old railroad right-of-way, Center Boulevard, just before entering the downtown business district of Fairfax you will have to stop at the intersection of Pastori and Center. If you were to travel back more than one hundred years, you would be at the Pastori rail station named after Charles and Adele Pastori and their popular Italian restaurant. In 1893, the Pastoris leased the old Charles Fairfax property and called it the Fairfax Villa. Both Adele and Charles were known as excellent chefs and for their connections to San Francisco society; Adele was a former performer on stage and Charles a set designer and builder. This assured their establishment a continuous and somewhat glittering clientele. Within a few years, they had changed the villa's name to Pastori’s. It enjoyed a world-wide reputation for fine dining.

They purchased the land in 1905 and made the town of Fairfax a culinary destination, adding lodging for overnight and extended visits. They had four children, Ione, Enrico, Clementina and Umberco who grew up on the property, as the family’s living quarters were on the second floor of the villa. The restaurant attracted visitors not only for its fine food, but also its beautifully landscaped grounds and the pleasant outside dining experience afforded by a large, covered porch and dining area. Period advertisements for the restaurant touted it as, “The Ideal Place. Open the year round. Cooking unsurpassed. Meals served under the trees.”

The Pastoris were also civic-minded, helping to establish and build the first schoolhouse in Fairfax where Charles served as trustee for many terms and raising funds for Italian victims of the 1908 Strait of Messina earthquake. In 1911 at the height of the family’s success tragedy struck. Charles died of heart failure at 58 years of age, and the Villa burned down 6 months later.

Undaunted, Adele had the home and restaurant rebuilt on an even grander scale, adding more cottages and rooms for guests and a maple dance floor for parties and events. She also built a platform in one of the large oaks near the dining room, where, it is said, Irving Berlin once played a piano that had been hauled aloft in order to serenade the dining guests. Adele and her children operated the establishment until a declining business environment and Prohibition led her to sell. It was bought by the San Francisco based Emporium Capwell Department Store in 1925 as a resort for their employees. The company installed a large pool, tennis courts, baseball diamonds, dormitories and additional cottages. The resort was very popular for another 10 years but was closed and leased to the Marin School for Boys in 1937. In 1944, San Francisco businessman Max Friedman bought the property, adding more swimming pools, stabling for horses, additional dance floors and summer cabins and christened it, The Marin Town & Country Club. The popular club welcomed day visitors and overnight guests for many years until it closed in 1972. The property is now a private residential area, but one can still picture the thousands of guests that have dined, danced and played near the intersection of Center Boulevard and Pastori Avenue.

By Scott Fletcher

Photo Source: Pastoris c. 1916, MHM Collection
The life and times of the Hotel Rafael could read like a screenplay of one of those old movies full of intrigue, luxury, drama and scandal. The Hotel Rafael cost $200,000 to build and occupied 21 acres in San Rafael — the first luxury hotel in Marin County. It opened in June 1888 to much fanfare. The hotel had 100 rooms, multiple dining rooms, an observation tower, gardens, tennis courts, stable, bowling alleys, card and billiard rooms, a photography darkroom and a playground and donkey carts for children. The hotel's tennis courts gained an international reputation and many of the world's top players played there.

Fine hotels of that era often served as summer resorts, and many guests stayed for three months and returned each summer, while others were permanent residents. Room rates ranged from $1.50 per day to $15 for suites with weekly and monthly rates available.

When one of the founders, James Donohue, died in 1890, Baron von Schroeder, originally from Hamburg, Germany, purchased all the stock in the Hotel Rafael. He expanded the hotel to 200 rooms and made other improvements. By this time, the Baron was well known within the wealthy social circles.
Despite having married one of Mr. Donahue’s daughters, he began womanizing and drinking. This caused shock waves through local society. There is no doubt the baron’s dalliances tarnished the hotel’s reputation. Its popularity declined. After inheriting his father’s estate in 1908 in Germany, the baron closed the hotel. In 1914, he was called back to Germany to fight in WWI. When the United States entered the war in 1917, the hotel became alien property. After the war ended, the hotel served as a hospital for those afflicted with the devastating Spanish flu of 1918. A few years later, W.C. Jurgens, a hotelier from Oakland, took over the hotel, and it was back in business. The Hotel Rafael flourished again into the mid 1920s.

On July 29, 1928, the hotel caught fire and despite the valiant efforts of fire fighters burned down in three hours. Miraculously, all staff and guests were unharmed. Initially, the fire was thought to have started from faulty wiring, but later an angry employee confessed to setting the fire.

Many stories about the hotel have been passed down through the years. The story of Julia Singer is one of those. Julia, born in 1888, moved to Marin County from Butte, Montana with her husband and son sometime between 1915-1920 and began working at the grand and ill-fated Hotel Rafael, most likely in housekeeping.

As the five-story, 200-room hotel burned to the ground the hotel staff, including Julia Singer, rushed to evacuate the 150 guests. Following the fire, staff were thanked with furniture from the staff living quarters and were also given serving pieces as compensation. During the chaos of the fire, this small pitcher, now in the Museum collection, somehow found its way into Julia’s pocket and has been passed down through her family ever since. It is engraved with “Hotel Rafael” on one side in script; stamped “Reed & Barton, Pat. Feb. 16, 1898” on bottom. It was given to the Museum by Doreen Wright, Julia Singer’s great-grand daughter.

After more than 10 years, developers bought the hotel grounds in 1939 for $40,000 and subdivided it into residential lots. Today, two entrance pillars to the stately grounds remain at the corner of Rafael Drive and Belle Avenue.

By Lane Dooling

Photo Sources: Porter courtesy of Noah McMillan. All other photos from MHM collection.
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The town of Nicasio was founded in the early 19th century, supplanting the first inhabitants, the Coast Miwok. It was rich in beauty and tranquility – the Coast Miwok were able to live off the land with fresh water, game and fish, berries, seeds and greens. Sadly, the combination of land grants and governmental actions along with an epidemic caused the Miwoks disappearance from Nicasio in the mid 1800s.

After complicated land grant and ownership changes, Nicasio became a thriving community in the 1860s. The vision of the quaint town square is credited to Mr. William Miller. He purchased 7,000 acres around Nicasio and divided it into farms. In 1867, he relocated a few buildings in what would become the center square and built the Nicasio Hotel at a cost of $11,000 for the building and furnishings. The hotel was “equipped with the latest and best furnishings for the guests' use in all areas … including the bar, parlor, dining room, ballroom and guest rooms,” according to Joe McNeil, whose grand-uncle ran the hotel at the turn of the century. Mr. Miller held a Grand Opening Ball on August 20, 1867, which was attended by 500 guests.

By this time, Nicasio was a prosperous town. The top industries were cattle grazing, saw mills and fishing. The hotel's thirty-two rooms always nearly filled by cattle and timber traders along with San Franciscans who spent weekends and vacations in the peaceful and delightful valley. The hotel was prominent in local affairs including fundraisers, lectures, musical programs, and entertainers. By 1908, Nicasio accommodated many “professionals,” including W. J. Anderfuren, blacksmith; E. K. Cornwell, horseshoer; W. T. Farley, wholesale and retail butcher; G. L. Marioni, saloon keeper; J. L. Redding, dairyman; and Jim Sam, cow puncher and hotel chef.

A slow decline started in 1893 with a financial panic that had a domino effect across the country, along with more competition in Pt. Reyes and Bolinas. The management changed hands numerous times yet dances, card games, special events and other activities continued along with some guests taking residence in the hotel. In the 1930s, with more options around, the dances stopped and the “serviceable” chairs and tables replaced elegant furniture — the first-class country hotel had diminished. On the evening of December 15, 1940, the hotel burned down.

A year later, John Mertens built the Rancho Nicasio where the hotel once stood, and it once again became the meeting place for the townspeople. The town square consists of Rancho Nicasio, St. Mary's Church (est. 1890), a general store, post office (est. 1870) and a volunteer fire department … along with a tranquility and nostalgia of an almost forgotten era.

By Lane Looling
The Libertys rebuilt the resort, but they were apparently having marital problems, because in 1891 Vincent left and rented a ranch in Clayton. Mary Jane hired a young Swiss immigrant named Severino Pezzaglia, known as Sam. Sam and his wife moved onto the ranch. By the following year the Pezzaglias were managing the ranch. In 1898, Mary Jane turned the ranch over to the Pezzaglias and moved to San Jose.

After the 1906 earthquake, Marin needed more water to support its booming population. The water district built a dam at Alpine that would flood the valley. In 1908 they bought the ranch and razed the ranch buildings.

Mary Jane Liberty died in 1919, Vincent in 1923. Leland had died in 1902, and their remaining child Elodia died childless in 1954. Now nothing remains of the Libertys and their resort except for some old foundations far beneath the waters of Alpine Lake.

By Brian Crawford

Photo Source: Photo 1 courtesy of the Jack Mason Museum of West Marin History. Photo 2 courtesy of Nancy Skinner.
The Inns of Mt. Tamalpais

Built in 1904, the West Point Inn has been a destination for hikers, picnickers, nature lovers, bicyclists and overnight guests for 116 years. Sitting high up Mount Tamalpais with majestic views of the Bay Area, the inn was built by the Mill Valley and Mt. Tamalpais Scenic Railway as the westernmost point of their famed “Crookedest Railway in the World.” From there, tourists could take a stagecoach to Willow Camp, now Stinson Beach, and the town of Bolinas.

Despite being literally off the grid — still outfitted with gas lamps — and being a two-mile trek from the closest parking, the West Point Inn has remained a popular working inn. In 2011, it was listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

This historic inn has survived more than a century’s worth of calamities, pandemics, wars and economic upheavals. According to historian Fred Runner, the West Point Inn “has been a stubborn survivor of events that should have by all accounts led to its demise.” After the stagecoach service ended in 1915, the railroad saw no further use for the inn, and it was put up for sale at the bargain price of $700. But there were no buyers, and it was closed down at the end of tourist season. Luckily the hikers of Mt. Tamalpais came to the inn’s rescue in 1916, seeing it as an ideal resting stop and a valuable “port in the storm” during bad weather. The group known as the Tamalpais Conservation Club convinced the owners to keep the inn open and to enlarge the porch and add other amenities.

The 1918-1919 influenza pandemic that killed 675,000 Americans and 50 million people worldwide was the next threat. In addition, the inn was repeatedly threatened by wildfires. In the 1920s the roof caught fire in one particularly devastating blaze. On another occasion in the 1930s, overnight guests were snowed in and a rescue effort was mustered to plow the road and bring them off the mountain.

In 1930, as automobiles became more popular the railroad was shut down, and the Marin Municipal Water District took ownership of the inn. It continued to see business from the hiking community until the onset of World War II. The Dean family managed the inn during this time and had to subsidize it with family savings because of the significant decline in hikers. Eventually, the family had to give it up and word got around that the inn was yet again facing closure. Once again, hikers and environmentalists banded together in March 1943 to come up with a system to run the inn on a volunteer basis.

In the 1970s, the long-neglected maintenance of the building brought it back into the public spotlight. Pancake breakfasts helped sustain repair costs in the 1980s, but moving into the internet age is what reinvigorated the inn. Volunteers from the West Point Inn Association created a website and began successfully taking reservations online. Large repairs are now easier to manage, and the inn is full of visitors most of the year with weekends sold out months in advance. The inn sustains itself through its room and cabin rentals as well as its 600 member association. Marin Municipal Water District leases the inn and cabins to the association for $1,200 per year. The lease will expire at the end of 2022, and members are currently raising funds to keep the inn afloat...trying to keep this historic gem alive for another 100 years.
The Tavern of Tamalpais opened in 1896. The Mill Valley and Mount Tamalpais Scenic Railway opened the tavern at the mountain’s summit to provide visitors with a hearty meal and comfortable accommodations. After a spur line was added in 1907, visitors could also travel from the tavern to Muir Woods. The famous gravity cars were added at this time for a ride down the mountain on what was called the “Crookedest Railroad in the World.” In 1923 the tavern burned to the ground, but was rebuilt in 1924 and remained in operation until World War II.

The Muir Woods Inn was one of three inns built in the late 1800s and early 1900s spurred on by the completion of the Mill Valley and Mount Tamalpais Scenic Railroad. The inn opened in June 1908 and was said to have the same rustic character as the Old Faithful Lodge in Yellowstone Park. It had a lovely wrap-around deck and the restaurant offered a la carte menu items. Sadly, in 1913, the inn was destroyed by fire. A second more modest inn was built in 1914 and offered cabins for overnight guests along with a buffet food service. A 1917 brochure described the inn as “Hidden in the heart of the fern-clad forest are the city comforts of Muir Inn.” The building was destroyed after the railroad discontinued in 1930.

Photo Source: MHM Collection

By Lane Dooling
The Marshall Hotel overlooking Tomales Bay had a long and rich history before fire destroyed the inn in 1971. Originally named the Bay View Hotel, it was built in 1870 by the Marshall brothers, Hugh, James, Samuel, Alexander, and David. According to an 1896 Marin Journal article the Marshalls, “removed to California, bringing with them a large drove of cattle, most of them milk cows. They settled at Tomales, took up a tract of land of over 1100 acres, and began a dairy and stock business, which grew in importance until it made the brothers very wealthy.” The hotel provided vacationers with ample opportunities “for sailing, fishing, shooting and clamming” and was a stop on the soon-to-be-completed North Pacific Coast Railroad. There were hot and cold salt-water baths, and rooms were furnished in “elegant Victorian décor, including brass beds kept highly polished.” The brothers also built a tavern and hardware store in 1873 that still stands today though it has been vacant since 1990.

The hotel suffered severe fire damage in an 1897 blaze but was rebuilt in 1899 and renamed The Marshall Hotel. James Marshall’s widow, Rachel, leased the land to proprietors Mr. and Mrs. John Shields who ran the inn and neighboring livery stable, tavern and hardware store well into the 1930s. The hotel had 19 rooms and was elegantly appointed in Victorian-style comforts. To celebrate the reopening of the new hotel, Mr. and Mrs. Shields hosted a “Grand Ball & Supper” on Saturday, December 23 that was attended by hundreds of local residents from Olema to Tomales.

The hotel seems to have changed its name for a short period of time around the turn of the 19th century as newspaper advertisements refer to the North Shore Hotel run by Mrs. John Shields. The North Coast Pacific Railroad which stopped right in front of the hotel drummed up business by advertising local attractions to prospective tourists and sportsmen claiming that “the estuary was covered with wild fowl and filled with fish.” The devastating 1906 earthquake caused the hotel to slip off its piers and into the bay, causing $15,000 of damage. However, the Shields’ rebuilt the inn and were back in business within a year. During Prohibition, The Marshall Hotel was known to be a dropping off point for illegal liquor coming down the Pacific Coast on its way to San Francisco.

The hotel passed through many hands in its later years and was occasionally remodeled and updated but kept its Victorian charm until the end. During the late 1940s and early 1950s, science students from Modesto Junior College made an annual expedition to Marshall using the hotel as their headquarters to study the Tomales Bay flora and fauna. In the 1960s and early 1970s the Marshall Hotel hosted numerous musical guests and acts including a month-long folk festival taught by guitar teacher Rolf Cahn, Sunday performances of the Bay City Dixieland Jazz Band, weekly chamber music concerts by a trio named “Erotic Bach” and performances by folk legend and long-time Marin resident Mimi Farina with her musical partner Tom Jans. The photograph above was taken in 1971, the year the hotel met its fiery end.

By Scott Fletcher

Photo source: Marshall Hotel c. 1971. MHM Collection
The Black Point Inn, just west of the Petaluma River, was the hub of the Black Point community for close to 90 years. Most sources agree that the first building there was constructed around 1890. Local historians tell the tale of a Norwegian sea captain who, giving up his ocean-going life, beached his boat on the point and built it himself. Originally it was a store, tavern and stagecoach stop for guests traveling the route of present-day Highway 37. Through the decades, the inn has served the local community as a post office, hotel, saloon and restaurant, church, railway stop and community meeting house. By all accounts, “Black Point” got its name from the very dark woodland that covered the hills of the point as seen from ships on the bay.

Its location near the Petaluma River and Bay attracted both hunters and fisherman and, over the years, many vacationers built summer cottages in the area. There are records of the property being purchased in 1920 by William Miller and his wife May. The census of that year lists them as Postmaster and Assistant Postmaster for Black Point. Three years later, William died and May married Louis Nave. The two managed the inn, store and post office until selling it in 1944. There were 10 hotel rooms upstairs, and a rosewood bar, restaurant, banquet room, post office, and grocery store on the first floor.

During Prohibition, the inn had an unsavory reputation as a ‘speakeasy’ due to its secluded location near the Bay where illegal shipments of liquor could be brought in undetected. That reputation spilled into the later decades when a brawl erupted at the inn in 1959 between two women over a hurled insult that soon developed into a raging street fight. Three women were eventually arrested in downtown Novato after fleeing Black Point and continuing their skirmish down the road at the Plush Room Bar on Center Blvd.

Through the 1960s and 70s the inn changed hands a number of times and became a more family-oriented establishment while still maintaining its status as a favorite watering hole and eatery. It featured dancing to live music by the “Dick Saltzman Trio – Direct from the Hyatt Regency, San Fran.”, and the popular jazz and pop group, The Duxbury Trio. The food was first class and included American, Continental and Chinese cuisine courtesy of Al & Joe Louie, chefs at the popular 751 Club in San Rafael. Harry Craft’s column in the Independent Journal, “Dining Out & Inns”, always gave the Black Point Inn top marks for its food, ambiance and service. The inn also had an outdoor dining patio and swimming pool installed that catered to families with kids for cooling off on warm summer days. The much-loved roadhouse was gutted by fire on April 29, 1976 and never rebuilt. The property is now home to Kelleher Lumber Co. of Black Point.

By Scott Fletcher

Photo Source: MHM Collection
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Thank you for sharing your time and talent with the Marin History Museum

Brian K. Crawford is a retired computer programmer who spends his time doing historical and genealogical research, writing books, and building trails.

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Scott Fletcher has volunteered with MHM for nine years, cataloging the Louise Boyd collection. He has written the Marin IJs “History Watch” articles since February 2017.

Alice Tanner, born in Tiburon, has witnessed Marin’s transformation over several decades. An addiction consultant in private practice, she works with families locally and nationwide.
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