



The Story Behind Boyd Park, San Rafael

By Scott Fletcher

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Boyd Park in San Rafael, nestled in the hills above the mission, owes its existence to the generosity of John and Louise Boyd who donated the land to the city in memory of their sons, John and Seth. The Boyds were affluent, leading citizens at the turn of the 20th century and had raised Seth, John and Louise; yes, that Louise of Arctic exploration fame, in San Rafael and at their large ranch near Mount Diablo that they called the Oakwood Park Stock Farm.

Heirs to the Bodie gold mine bonanza, the children had every luxury and advantage their parents could provide, and the boys were being groomed to take over their father's substantial commercial interests. However, within an eight-month period both boys would be taken from their loving family. Seth was living at his parent's Maple Lawn home in San Rafael (the present-day Elks Lodge) and attending Mt. Tamalpais Military Academy, the site of today's Marin Academy. One August morning in 1901 he did not come down for breakfast and his mother and brother had to force open the upstairs bedroom door where they found him dead. A small coal-gas stove in the room was leaking gas, and it was originally thought he had suffocated from the fumes. An autopsy later revealed that he had died from heart disease brought on by a childhood bout with rheumatic fever.

The death of their eldest son devastated the Boyds but another tragedy would soon take their younger son. John was attending the Thacher Boarding School in Ventura County the following April when he was caught in a sudden rainstorm while horseback riding with his fellow students. Upon his return to school, he became ill and died soon after. Though fighting a high fever before succumbing, doctors attributed the boys' death to the same rheumatic fever complications that had taken his brother. The beautiful, and somewhat melancholy photograph of Seth and John above was recently discovered in the collection of the Marin History Museum.

Inconsolable in their grief, the Boyds never fully recovered from this double tragedy. Three years later they donated a large portion of their San Rafael property to the City of San Rafael as a lasting memorial to their sons. The entire town closed down for the parade and dedication ceremony. School bands played music and sang, there were ceremonial tree plantings by local school children, and a lavish picnic lunch was served to thousands. With their sons gone, it fell to daughter Louise to help care for her grieving parents. Within a few years, Louise was helping run her father's businesses and taking charge of the family's affairs. With her curious, dynamic and forceful personality and the full inheritance from her family's holdings Louise was able to pursue her interests and a career as an arctic explorer and world traveler. Seth and John now rest alongside their parents in the Mt. Tamalpais Cemetery in San Rafael's Sun Valley neighborhood and in their memory, local families have been able to enjoy a lovely park to rest, reflect and play in for more than 116 years.

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