

CHANGING LAND USE

in the

KOTATI ~ RANCHO COTATE ~ COTATI

area of Sonoma County, CA

by

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THE LAGUNA DE SANTA ROSA: COTATI IN CONTEXT

The present-day town of Cotati/Rohnert Park can be said to lie at the headwaters of the Laguna de Santa Rosa, in the sense that from here, water flows northwest into the heart of the Laguna near Sebastopol, and on to the Russian River. The Laguna de Santa Rosa is the second largest freshwater wetland in coastal Northern California, covering 250 square miles. The Laguna is known as “the river that flows both ways” since in the summer it flows for 14 miles northwest to the Russian River, of which it is the main tributary, while in the winter it acts as a natural holding basin for floodwaters, and flows back the other way (City of Sebastopol, 2005). (Figure 1).

The Laguna de Santa Rosa is a unique ecological mosaic of open water, riparian forest, oak woodland and grassland. It is an important stopover for birds migrating along the Pacific Flyway, and its wetlands and surrounding upland areas provide habitat for a wide variety of wildlife. It acts as an important holding basin for floodwaters, and performs the other ecological functions of a wetland, including filtering the water it holds (City of Sebastopol, 2005).

Explorer and diarist Frank Marryat described the Sonoma and Santa Rosa Valleys in 1850: “studded with groups of oaks and flowering evergreens [with] herds of deer and “well-timbered land”, wild horses and “here and there a drove of elk or antelopes...a marsh full of wild fowl, and, stretching for miles around [a] wooded plain, covered with grass, in some places as tall as ourselves. The plain...abounded with deer, elk, and antelope...” (Marryat, 1855/1977).

Since the time of European settlement the Laguna has been altered and heavily impacted by drainage, channelization, agriculture and urban development. Over the past two decades many attempts have been made to protect the Laguna from further impacts from the pressures of agricultural and urban development. A number of reports were written starting with the first

student's baseline study in 1977, and in 1990 Congressman Bosco proposed legislation to create a 9,000-acre Laguna de Santa Rosa National Wildlife Refuge, but his effort failed. Further planning efforts have involved federal and state agencies, and non-profit groups, including the US Fish & Wildlife Service, US Army Corps of Engineers, California Department of Fish & Game, Sonoma County Agricultural and Open Space District, California State Coastal Conservancy, Sonoma Land Trust, and Laguna de Santa Rosa Foundation, and many others.

The Laguna de Santa Rosa is a controversial topic, rarely out of the news these days, as environmentalists and developers argue over wetlands, vernal pools and endangered species, particularly the California tiger salamander and Sebastopol meadowfoam; as the Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria, descendants of the Coast Miwok, attempt to exercise their rights to build a casino west of Rohnert Park, in the face of vocal opposition; and as environmentalists debate whether to spray or hand-remove invasive plant species which are clogging the Laguna and providing habitat for mosquitoes, carriers of West Nile virus. The Sonoma County Water Agency, which has jurisdiction over the waterways for flood control purposes, is gradually moving from a "pave it and pipe it" philosophy of channelization, towards recognizing the importance of an ecological balance; the role of native trees in stabilizing banks, preventing soil erosion, improving water quality and aquatic habitat, shading vegetation out of creek channels; and even in some cases re-creating natural creek meanders that had previously been straightened.

However, ever since the area east of the boundary of the City of Cotati ("the Cotati reach") was omitted from the Laguna de Santa Rosa Coordinated Resource Management Plan of 1995, it has not been considered in most of these discussions, and it is only in the last few years that the Laguna de Santa Rosa Foundation has included the Cotati reach of the Laguna in its remit. Since 1995, a small group of Cotati citizens, an ad hoc group calling itself the Cotati

Creek Critters, has been working to remove exotic species and plant native trees along the banks of the Laguna de Santa Rosa channel in Cotati. They have recently applied for an Urban Stream Restoration grant from the California Department of Water Resources and have been collaborating with the City of Cotati, the Sonoma County Water Agency, and the Laguna de Santa Rosa Foundation. The group is well aware that its work is not “creek restoration,” since original conditions can never be restored, but it is working to enhance natural habitat for wildlife, improve water quality, raise local environmental awareness and encourage public participation and enjoyment of the Cotati reach of the Laguna. This paper attempts to provide a historical backdrop to these efforts by tracing the history and impacts of the land use of the area.

Meanwhile, just south of Cotati, water flows southeast towards the Petaluma River and San Pablo Bay, and this geographical location has heavily influenced the changing land use of the area and its development from the time of European settlement onwards.

KOTATI

The earliest inhabitants of the area around the present-day town of Cotati were the Coast Miwok. They had a settlement called Kotati, just to the north of present-day Cotati (Barrett, 1908; Collier, 1990). (Figure 2).

Estimates of how long ago the Coast Miwok lived in the area before European contact range widely: “over 3,000 years ago” (Petaluma Historical Library & Museum); “6,000-10,000 years ago” (Petaluma Visitors’ Program, 2005); 8,000 years (Santa Rosa Plain Vernal Pool Ecosystem Preservation Plan, 1995); “11,000 years ago” (Sonoma Land Trust, 2003). There is “... archaeological evidence [of] human occupation [in the area]...at least 12,000 years ago” (Frederickson, 1984).

Groups of native peoples inhabited the area, living in tribelets or extended family units. Kotati lay at the northernmost end of the territory occupied by the Coast Miwok, people

characterized as such on the basis of their language. They lived along the rivers, creeks, bays, lagoons and shorelines of Marin and Sonoma counties. Estimates of their numbers at the time of European contact range widely: from 2,000-3,000 people (Petaluma Historical Library & Museum), to a “conservative” estimate of 7,000-10,000 (Sarris, 2002).

The lives of the Coast Miwok were intricately linked to the changing seasons. During winter months they used traps, dip nets and stabbing spears to catch steelhead and salmon. They ate mussels, clams and shellfish. They hunted bear, elk and deer; rabbit, cottontail, wood rats, gophers and squirrels. Land birds and aquatic birds were trapped or netted, some for food, some for the feathers. In the fall, acorns, buckeyes, bay and hazel nuts were collected and stored in a granary for year-round consumption. The leached meal was boiled, to make mush; or mixed with water and red earth and baked as bread. Tobacco was gathered along Healdsburg and Santa Rosa creeks in South Pomo country (Tuomey, 1926). “In the late spring, fresh new greens of Indian lettuce, young nettle leaves and clover were gathered. Fire-hardened digging sticks were used by the women to reach deep-set roots and bulbs. The ocean provided kelp in large amounts, some to be eaten fresh, the rest dried and stored for the winter. Tule was gathered in the fall for skirts and tule baskets. The summer sun ripened grasses and flower seeds, gathered by hitting the ripened seed with a beater basket and letting them fall directly into a collecting basket” (Point Reyes National Seashore, 2001).

“Dwellings ... were constructed of poles tied together to make a conical frame, and set round an excavation of 2 to 4 ft deep...A thatch of bundles of rushes was bound upon the cone of poles, and mud to the thickness of a foot, was then plastered over the rushes.” A hole was left at the apex of the cone for smoke to escape from the central fire...”The family lived, ate and slept in the one apartment, skins of animals, brush or dried grass making seats and beds.” The winter

hut would be abandoned and burned and a new one built for the summer, thatched with brush or rushes, usually erected near the bank of a stream or body of water (Tuomey, 1926).

The Coast Miwok used stone pounding and grinding rocks to make flour, and used and traded obsidian for spear points, shafts, blades; and clams and mussel shells, including in the form of beads (Petaluma Historical Library and Museum). They selectively managed plants, tilling, weeding, and pruning, according to their needs. They harvested and burned tules and bulrushes, to stimulate fresh growth, using them for thatch, matting, bedding, clothing, and to make canoes, baskets, rope and cordage. They used fire-hardened digging sticks to dig for roots and tubers, and cooked them by baking or boiling. They coppiced willow, which they used for creating baskets and shelters. Elderberry was used for arrows, flutes, whistles and pipes for smoking tobacco. Plants were harvested for medicinal uses and sometimes brewed into teas (Stevens, 2004). They had a rich culture, based upon their spiritual beliefs and connections with the forces of nature.

It is thought that Sir Francis Drake was the first European to set foot in Sonoma County, landing either at Bodega Bay or at Drakes Bay, in 1579, and that he was greeted by the people of a Miwok village. He is said to have claimed the land for England as the “New Albion”.

RANCHO COTATE

It was not until nearly two centuries later, in 1769, that the Spanish first occupied the land of the Indians (Tuomey, 1926). By the 1800s, the Spanish were very concerned about Russian and English fur trappers who were operating in Alaska and the Pacific northwest. The Russian influence in California was established by the founding of Fort Ross in 1812, as a center for growing food to be shipped north to Russian settlements in Alaska, to augment the fish diets. The Mexicans became nervous about the burgeoning settlement. Under orders from the Mexican

government, missionaries from Spain founded missions at San Rafael in 1817 and Sonoma in 1823. This was disastrous for the Indians. Many, perhaps as many as 90%, had died due to their lack of immunity to diseases introduced by the Europeans. The survivors were captured, brought into the missions, and made to work the mission lands.

In 1834, Governor Figueroa of Mexico ordered Lieutenant Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo to establish a military post at Sonoma. “To help him colonize the Sonoma region and to create a buffer zone between the Russians and the Californians, Figueroa gave Vallejo title to a ten-league grant known as the Rancho Petaluma, a parcel eventually enlarged to include some 66,000 acres. It embraced most of the country between Petaluma River and Sonoma Creek. Dividing the grant was the Sonoma mountain range. On one side was the Sonoma valley; on the other were undulating grasslands that descended toward the Petaluma River... Excellent for agricultural pursuits of all kinds, the Rancho Petaluma contained some of the best wine country in the world and had direct access to San Pablo Bay” (Rosenus, 1995). (Figure 3). The rancho became an important center for the breeding of cattle, viniculture, and the manufacture of clothing, carpets, blankets, and leather. “By 1845 there were more than 50,000 Vallejo cattle in the valley” (Petaluma Visitors’ Program, 2005). Ox carts from the rancho carried hides to the Petaluma landing on the Petaluma river, “for transport downstream to the sleepy village of Yerba Buena” (San Francisco) (Petaluma Visitors’ Program).

“A drastic change to the vegetation of the Santa Rosa Plain was the conversion of the native grassland vegetation after cattle were introduced on the scene...The lifestyle practiced by these early settlers varied greatly from that of the Native Americans, who were often coerced to work on the ranches. [They] introduced ... a cattle export industry. Longhorn cattle were raised primarily for hides and tallow, which were shipped to Mexico. Although this practice (in which

the bulk of the animal was discarded) benefited the carrion-feeding wildlife, the native grasses were reduced by grazing. The original Santa Rosa Plain grassland was dominated by a mix of perennial bunchgrasses and annual forbs. The longhorns, and later varieties of cattle, quickly destroyed the forage base of native grasses, which were not adapted to such heavy use (Heady 1988; Bartholomew 1987). In their place, new plants, survivors of thousands of years of livestock use in a climate similar to California's arrived from the Mediterranean" (City of Sebastopol, 2005).

General Vallejo paid some of his soldiers with land. In 1844 Juan Castenada, a native of Texas and the veteran of many battles between Spanish and Mexican armies, who had built a home in the Santa Rosa valley, received a land grant of 17,238.6 acres from Vallejo – the Rancho Cotate. Located north of Vallejo's Petaluma adobe, and south of Santa Rosa, the rancho included present-day Cotati, Rohnert Park, Penngrove, and the surroundings. Tuomey (1926) writes that having "received several grants of land, but not fulfilling the legal requirements in the case of the Rancho Cotate, eventually that tract was lost to him..." Castenada settled in San Francisco, and sold all of his land holdings to Thomas Larkin, the American consul in Monterey. Larkin sold the grant to Thomas S Ruckel who sold it to Dr Thomas Page, for \$16,000, in 1849 (DeClercq, 1976; Draper, 2004).

Dr Thomas Page, who lived in Valparaiso, Chile, for many years, came to California and in 1846 was appointed sheriff of the District of Sonoma. "...desiring to possess a large landed property in the Sonoma and Petaluma regions, [he] applied for the idle Cotati ranch. There was much to do to make of that low lying, heavily soiled area a profitable and healthful home, but Dr Page had the brains and industry to make a great success of his rancho" (Tuomey, 1926).

According to Tuomey, though, Dr Page "sold to the settlers living thereon the property which they occupied, and after clearing the title had remaining 13,000 acres of land, which was

utilized as a stock ranch” for cattle and sheep. In 1850, writing from the Carrillo Adobe in Santa Rosa, Frank Maryatt wrote: “Previous to the occupation of this country by the Americans, its fertile plains had been granted away by the Mexican government, to such as chose to settle here and stock the land. The terms on which these grants were to be held, easy as they were, were for the most part evaded, and after a new settler had portioned out for himself so many square leagues of a fat valley, and had sent the record of his property to head quarters, he built himself a house, bought a few head of cattle and horses, which were turned off to breed, and he became from that time a rancho. Cattle increased and multiplied and at last were killed for their hides, which were sent down occasionally to San Francisco and there placed on board ship.

“By the treaty formed between the United States and Mexico previous to the occupation of California the original grants of land were guaranteed to the native settlers in all cases where the claim could be properly established....The Americans therefore on their arrival in the country had the mortification to discover that nearly every foot of arable land was private property, and that there remained nothing but barren hills and swamps to settle on and improve... They therefore squatted where they pleased on the Spanish ranches... the property that was but the other day a waving tract of wild grass... is parceled out and enclosed, and cultivated from end to end, and from squatters’ huts curls the smoke on every side...” (Marryat, 1855/1977) (Figure 4).

In 1872, Thomas Page died. He had specified that the ranch was not to be subdivided until his oldest son, William, was 25 years old. In 1892 his sons formed the Cotati Land Company and subdivided the vast acreage into small farms. To head up the marketing of the five, ten and twenty acre parcels, they hired David W. Batchelor, who sold over 900 tracts of land for them. (Figure 5a & b). “Nine thousand acres of land has been sold in this way, the remainder comprising the ranch as it is now operated...” (Tuomey, 1926). By 1900 the Cotati Land Company owned only 4,000 acres, “primarily low black meadowland in the sink of the

valley, which was crossed by several creeks, subject to frequent flooding, and used primarily for grazing” (DeClercq, 1976). The Cotati ranch was the last of all the original land grants in Sonoma County to be subdivided and portions sold out of the family.

In 1926 Tuomey wrote: “Fred Keppel is the manager of the Cotati ranch in Sonoma County, one of the largest bodies of land under single ownership in this part of the country... in 1906 he came to Cotati and opened a blacksmith shop, which he conducted successfully until 1911. In the latter year he was made manager of the great Cotati ranch, having under his direction from fifteen to fifty men. He farms four thousand acres of land which is principally devoted to the cultivation of hay and grain...” (Tuomey, 1926). George P. McNear was the next land baron to acquire the remainder of the Rancho. McNear did not take much of a personal interest in the Rancho, but rather, bought out the Cotati Land Co. and allowed the farm to be managed much as it had under the Pages (Rohnert Park Historical Society).

COTATI

Meanwhile, great changes had been occurring, which had a direct impact on land use in the Cotati area. In 1848, gold was discovered at Sutter’s Mill, in the Sierran foothills. Gold seekers poured into the once “sleepy town of Yerba Buena”, now booming as the city of San Francisco, creating a demand for lumber and for produce of all kinds. The town of Petaluma, begun as a hunters’ camp supplying game to San Francisco, was founded in 1852, because of its location on Petaluma Creek. Now called the Petaluma River, this is actually a tidal slough, 14 miles from San Pablo Bay. Chinese laborers were brought in to straighten the bends in the river, hauling away the mud in wheelbarrows. Later a steam excavator deepened, straightened, and widened the slough, allowing steamships to travel to Petaluma. (Petaluma Visitors’ program, 2005). “Ever since the first settlement of the southern part of the county began, Petaluma Creek has been a valuable water route, affording cheap transportation of passengers and freight ... The

Federal Government has caused some dredging to be done in the channel, and also has lessened the time for making trips and reduced the tortuous windings of the estuary by cutting through necks of land and giving the water a straighter route. There is still room for improvement” (Tuomey, 1926). Thanks to its position on the Petaluma Creek, Petaluma became a major manufacturing center with flour, shoes, beer, carriages, ships, butter and more being shipped south down the river to the San Francisco Bay cities.

The wealth of the redwood forests, and the difficulty and expense of hauling timber by mule and ox teams, spurred the development of the railroad, which carried lumber from the sawmills, and “great quantities of shingles, laths, pickets, cordwood, tan bark and charcoal” to San Francisco (Tuomey, 1926). The San Francisco & North Pacific Railroad laid track through valley and in 1870 the railroad from Petaluma to Santa Rosa was completed, with Page’s Station (later Cotate Station) as a wood-and-water stop along the way. (Figure 6).

In the 1890’s Dr Page’s son Wilfred commissioned Thomas Smyth, a surveyor, to lay out a town site for Cotati. (Figure 7). The hexagonal town plan may have been modeled after a hexagonal barn and watering trough on the Page’s ranch. The six streets were named after Dr Page’s sons William, Charles, Henry, Arthur, Olaf and George, with nearby streets being named Wilfred Street and Page Street, and Valparaiso Street named in honor of the founder’s former home. The design was unique enough to be given State Historical Landmark status in 1973. In 1894 the first Post Office opened and by the turn of the century Page's Station had become a town named Cotati. By 1911, the population of the town has risen to 1,000.

Petaluma had begun to develop a poultry industry in 1858, and this received a boost in the mid1870’s when Canadian immigrant Lyman Bruce invented an incubator. “River transportation brings to Petaluma the grain from the interior valleys of the state... Many thousand tons of grain and feed are purchased every year and the river at Petaluma is lined with

enormous warehouses. The grain being purchased in such quantities assures lower prices to the feeder and the low freight rates prevailing make the production of poultry and eggs a very profitable venture.” Between 1915 and 1955 Petaluma became known as the egg basket of the world – and the chicken-farming area extended for miles in all directions around Petaluma.

After World War II the chicken industry began to die out and was gradually replaced by the dairy industry, and the production of hay. “In 1915, most of the production of wheat and oak grains was from the Dublin clay adobe (Clear Lake clay) in the area referred to as the "Cotati Valley" (Watson *et al.* 1917). This use of the land converted what was once a vast seasonal and perennial wetland complex into intensely managed cropland ... By this time, the production of grain was used mostly for hay, and was exported because volumes exceeded local need, a situation reversed today. Former areas of grain crops on better soils were converted to higher cash crops such as fruit trees (especially prunes, plums, pears and peaches)” (City of Sebastopol, 2005). In the last decade, orchards and dairy farms have increasingly given way to vineyards and urban development.

For many years, the two roads that connected Santa Rosa and Petaluma traversed the east and west boundaries of the ranch, avoiding the most direct route because the area was subject to annual flooding and much of the land remained marshlike the year round. The Hill Road (now called Petaluma Hill Road) was the high road to and from Santa Rosa. The road into and out of the Page ranch came off the "West Road," past the Washoe House (built in 1839). In 1915, the Redwood Highway was constructed (Figure 8). “The communities of Penngrove and Cotati reached a compromise as to the location of the road, and the local farmers donated the needed land for the right of way. The highway would serve as the main arterial through the valley until 1957” (DeClercq, 1977).

In 1929 the Cotati Rancho was sold to Waldo Emerson Rohnert, who became established with the C.D. Morse Company, the largest seed-growing farm in the west. He also planted large prune orchards. [His] first priority was “to minimize the periodic flooding of the fields. His crude drainage system [consisted of] a 2-foot mound down the middle of the field, with 2-foot ditches on each side. Then he concentrated on enriching the soils”. After his death, his son Fred farmed the Rancho, some as hay fields, some as seed farm. “North of what is now Rohnert Park Expressway, was 70 acres of sweet peas. South were carrots, onions, and beets. During World War II, it was difficult to find laborers, and many Filipinos were trucked in daily. That, added to the challenges of cultivating the adobe soil, caused Rohnert to be open to developers' plans” (DeClercq). (Figure 9).

In 1954 the developer Paul Golis began to plan the new town of Rohnert Park, and in 1957 he and his family moved into the first new homes. (Rohnert Park Historical Society). Highway 101 through was constructed between 1954-1962. In 1957 the Division of Highways completed the Cotati bypass (Sonoma County Transportation Authority). By the year 2000, the population of Rohnert Park had grown to over 42,000 (City Data.com); that of Cotati is now approximately 7,000.

CONCLUSION

Ever since the time of European settlement, the land surrounding the Cotati reach of the Laguna de Santa Rosa has been under ever-increasing pressures from development, the marshes drained, the waterways straightened and channelized (Figure 10) and much of the original native vegetation removed or replaced by invasive exotic plants. Over the past few years there has been an increasing recognition of the ecological value of wetlands in general and the Laguna in particular. Even in its most urban reach, work is now being done to enhance habitat, improve water quality and raise awareness about the importance of natural waterways and native plants.

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