

# Kentfield Greenbrae Historical Society Historian

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## President's Message

“On the road again...”

June is upon us once again, bringing with it sunny days, more relaxed schedules and the time-honored tradition of summer vacations. Whether you're leaving from your Greenbrae or Kentfield home in the fully-loaded family car or taking Uber to the airport, odds are pretty good that you'll exit our part of the Ross Valley via Sir Francis Drake Boulevard and the Greenbrae Interchange leading onto 101.

This issue of *The Historian* features photos of the interchange and the highway as it appeared in decades past: stark simplicity with a risky turn lane instead of the current-day concrete structures weaving over both the roads below and the constant landmark, Corte Madera Creek.

Also highlighted are photographs from the KGHS-sponsored May Day Celebration held on May 7 on the Kent Middle School campus. Attendees at the event, which included over 15 community groups, didn't allow raindrops to dampen their enthusiasm as they explored both the history of our Ross Valley communities and plans for our future!

Safe travels to all, whether your adventures include a picnic in the park or an excursion to the other side of the globe! And, at the end of the day, remember, “There's no place like home!”

Wishing you smooth sailing and ruby slippers (as needed!),

Susan Morrow

President, Kentfield-Greenbrae Historical Society, 2016-17

## Successful May Day Celebration

RAIN didn't dampen the spirit of the steady flow of community members who attended the May Day Celebration on May 7. Special thanks to the community groups who had displays in the Community Hall (outdoor quad) and who took time to talk to our visitors:



Rainy Day Sign



Sandy Guldman and the Corte Madera Creek Restoration Project

## Thanks to our Wonderful Community!

- Kentfield Fire District
- College of Marin
- Marin General
- Kent Woodlands Property Owners Association
- Greenbrae Property Owner's Association
- Kentfield Schools PTA
- Kentfield Schools kik Foundation
- Kentfield School District
- Kentfield School District Safe Routes to School Program
- Kentfield Planning Advisory Board
- Friends of Corte Madera Creek Watershed
- Ross Valley Nursery School
- Ross Valley Flood Protection & Watershed Program Sir Francis Drake Rehabilitation Project
- Assemblyman Marc Levine's Office
- The Marin Independent Journal
- Marin County Library which provided the vintage video of the 1909 May Day Activities
- Peets Coffee Bon Air (donated coffee)
- Woodlands Market (donated fresh fruit)



Adrian Golden, Justine Beales and Gavin Kurnik

Students from the Kent History Club spent much of the spring semester learning about local history in order to give walking tours of Kent School, the Corte Madera Creek and College Ave.

(more photos on our website)

## Traffic: Then and Now

Our community has been focused on the dramatic increase in traffic on all of our roads, but especially Sir Francis Drake Blvd and the Greenbrae Interchange. It's hard to imagine that US 101 was once a three lane road across the marshes, with the suicide lane used for cars turning left on to the Sir Francis Drake. Now traffic is backed up for miles in every direction especially during commute hours. A little bit of history will help you understand the changes, and why flooding along the highway will probably get even worse.

## Greenbrae Interchange

*Text from "In the Heart of Marin" by Dewey Livingston*

The original channel of Corte Madera Creek widened as it passed the Greenbrae Ranch, and no crossing was available anywhere between Kentfield and the bay until a drawbridge was constructed to allow train passengers to reach the Bon Air Hotel from Larkspur in the late 1890s. This was just east of today's Bon Air Road bridge. Downstream, the creek was surrounded by marshes, which were especially massive to the south. These kept road building at bay for some years, until a narrow road dubbed Tiburon Boulevard (or San Rafael-Tiburon Road) was constructed in increments around the turn of the century.

Talk of a road across the marshes to connect Tiburon with San Rafael began in earnest in 1891, but it would be some years before construction would start. Using convict labor courtesy of San Quentin State Prison, gangs cut adjacent hillsides and filled a long stretch across the marsh; in 1895 between 20 and 30 convicts were at work under contractor Jesse Colwell, who had built the San Rafael-Bolinas Road. Work continued in fits into 1900. The task was difficult, as the fill would settle and more rock and dirt needed to be hauled in without mechanical help. Crossing the wide creek at Greenbrae entailed building a bridge with lengthy approaches of both fill and trestle, and, in order to let boats pass, a drawbridge was required.



*The one-lane drawbridge was part of the "Tiburon Boulevard" road constructed across the marshes to San Rafael around 1900. (Courtesy of the Larkspur Heritage Preservation Board)*

## Membership Renewals

If your membership is up for renewal, you should have received a letter from us with some of our accomplishments as well as plans for the future. Please renew by June 30th to continue receiving this newsletter and information about our events. If you know of people who would like to join, please forward this newsletter to them and encourage them to become a member.

**DO IT ONLINE NOW** before you forget! ... [\*\*RENEW NOW!\*\*](#)

- \$20 - Students & Seniors
- \$30 - Individuals & Families
- \$50 - Business Membership
- \$100 - Patron
- \$250 - Benefactor \*
- \$500 - Historian \*
- \$500- Business Partner \*
- \$1000 + - Lifetime Membership\*
- \$1000+- Lifetime Business Partner \*

Or you can send a check: KGHS Membership, Box 236, Kentfield, CA 94914. Please include your name, level of membership, address, email and phone number. Included with your membership is the quarterly newsletter, special invitations to member events and an invitation to volunteer on one of our committees.

## Greenbrae Interchange Cont.

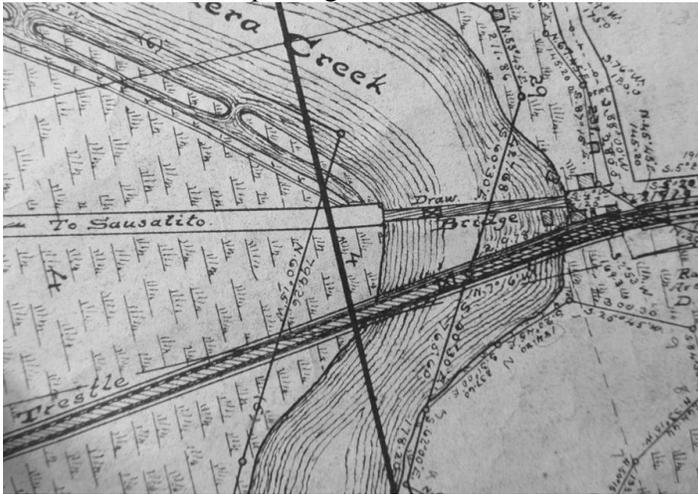
An easy grade was cut into the hills separating Greenbrae and San Rafael, known earlier as Tennessee Pass and later as Cal Park Hill. By 1902 the road was completed, but being narrow and rugged, and in constant need of repair, it was not a popular route until its replacement in 1930. There was no connection on the south to Sausalito, so most traffic remained on the Camino Alto route.

(cont. page 3)

## Greenbrae Interchange Cont.

Little is known about the first drawbridge on the site, but the second, built in 1917, was a one-lane wooden bascule bridge that was cranked up by hand. It was later mechanized.

The 1917 bridge, as well as the original narrow road, was replaced entirely in 1930 when the new state highway, to be numbered 101, opened. The new Redwood Highway replaced the old route that passed through Larkspur, Kentfield and San Anselmo. Now motorists could drive directly from the Sausalito ferries into San Rafael and beyond on a three-lane highway (two lanes with a “suicide lane” for passing between the two).



1920 Map of trestle and drawbridge over Corte Madera Creek (Courtesy of KGHS)

The new highway also required a drawbridge, this one an 84-foot span with long approaches, costing \$157,000 to build. It was much wider than the previous bridge and had a sidewalk. The steel mesh roadbed is memorable to old timers who recall the short period of vibration and sound as their cars went over the bridge. The timber trestle approaches to the old bridge were kept as fishing piers for a time.

The drawbridge was opened by controls in a small shack on the bridge. The bridge keeper must have lived nearby. This aspect did not make much sense with such a small amount of navigation on the creek; it was only opened seven or eight times during its 30-year lifespan, and once went for seven years without an opening.



Anne T. Kent California Room Collection

A car turns towards Kentfield from the three-lane highway 101 in the 1940's. (Anne T. Kent California Room, MCFL)

Concurrent with the opening of the new highway in 1930 were plans for a bridge connecting San Rafael with the East Bay. As early as 1928, with the Golden Gate Bridge in the works, a Richmond-San Rafael Bridge was discussed, and by 1930 there was a timetable for construction: start in 1931 and complete the \$15 million span in two years, by 1933. It was probably the Great Depression that killed that plan; a bridge would not be built until 1956.

Beginning in the late 1940s, the developments at Greenbrae and other developments farther inland, not to mention expansion at San Quentin Prison, created traffic pressures all along Sir Francis Drake Boulevard, still a two-lane road as of the mid-1950s. Traffic jams were especially bad at the Greenbrae intersection with Highway 101, where northbound drivers on the now four-lane highway made a left turn to cross the busy southbound highway to get onto Drake, and motorists wanting to go north from Drake also had to cross and merge. This was exacerbated by traffic to the Richmond ferry at San Quentin, where lines sometimes stretched for more than a mile on weekends and gummed up the intersection. Also, all traffic for the north state redwood country passed Greenbrae on the steel drawbridge.

In October of 1946, the State Division of Highways earmarked funds to study an overpass-type interchange at Greenbrae, noting the location as a “scene of many and often fatal crashes,” and the next year the agency proposed a second bridge, carrying three lanes of southbound traffic, across Corte Madera Creek as an answer to the problem. It took ten years to begin to implement that plan. Meanwhile, in 1948, the agency made plans to improve the

intersection preliminary to the major work to come; this included installation of traffic lights that were “entirely self-operated...when a car on Highway 101 approaches the intersection, it operates a magnetic device below the surface of the road which will turn the traffic light in its favor.”

In 1953, state highway engineers announced a plan to improve the intersection to a three-level freeway style. The construction would entail four bridges spanning Corte Madera Creek: two, two-lane bridges carrying the northbound and southbound highway lanes, and one each for the off ramp on the east and onramp on the west. Having a 21-foot clearance at low water, the 1,100-foot spans would replace the 23-year-old steel drawbridge, with only 12 feet of clearance when closed, and the hazardous turn lanes at the north end of the old bridge.

The new \$6 million, six-lane freeway section stretched from the Alto/Mill Valley intersection to San Rafael city limits, and also included a modern cloverleaf interchange at Corte Madera and a smaller interchange with underpass at Lucky Drive. Some objections were raised, notably by the mayors of Larkspur and Corte Madera, but their complaints were considered minor.

The first phase of construction started in 1956 with the \$1 million western bridge for southbound traffic, leaving the old drawbridge intact for a couple of years to accommodate the northbound lanes. The old Bret Harte road intersection, a short distance north of the new interchange, was closed, although the upper part remained as part of the Greenbrae subdivisions. The billboard advertising Greenbrae was torn down to make way for hillside cuts, but it was rebuilt soon in a slightly different location.

The new half-overpass was completed in April 1957. It was simply a three-lane concrete bridge, with no on-ramps. In a curious, and potentially dangerous, configuration, Sir Francis Drake Boulevard traffic wanting to enter the southbound lanes of Highway 101 would go east under the new span, turn right onto the western lane of the old four-lane bridge (the other three were northbound) and, after crossing the latter, would merge into the left-hand lane of the new southbound roadway. Northbound motorists still stopped at Sir Francis Drake with traffic signals. This was all changed when the interchange was completed; work started on the second phase, involving a new northbound bridge to replace the drawbridge and an onramp bridge from Sir Francis Drake to the recently completed southbound lanes, began in 1958, at a cost of \$1,800,000. This project also included a pedestrian bridge at Lucky Drive. Disaster struck when the newly poured southbound onramp bridge collapsed into Corte Madera Creek. Careful attention was paid as its replacement was constructed. When completed, the new interchange allowed all entry and exit from Highway 101 without the use of stoplights or signs. The old steel drawbridge was removed on July 29, 1960.

The freeway interchange has been in use more than 50 years, and, despite widening and rehabilitation, it utilizes almost the same traffic patterns as those adopted earlier. The two bridges have been widened to the extent that it is virtually one eight-lane bridge. As of this writing, a controversial plan has been proposed to replace the interchange with an entirely new design and remove the Lucky Drive pedestrian overpass.

*(In the Heart of Marin by Dewey Livingston pages 290-295)*

## KGHS What's ahead?

The KGHS has big plans for the coming school year...

**SAVE SATURDAY OCTOBER 1st for the GRAND OPENING OF THE**

**GEORGE DEMONT OTIS EXHIBIT AT COLLEGE OF MARIN**



- Continued curriculum development for the Third Grade students at Bacich
- Expanding the History Club at Kent Middle School to include tours of Kentfield, Greenbrae and other neighborhoods
- Archival work and education for everyone wanting to document family and local history

Please pass this newsletter on to your friends and encourage them to join the KGHS. Your support will allow us to continue to enrich the lives of students and the community. This all can be done on our website [www.kghs.org](http://www.kghs.org).

## Get involved!

We are always looking for more community members to become involved. If you are interested, please contact us!

- Events Committee
- Research & Archive Committee
- Membership & Outreach Com.

If you would like to be on one of the committees, contact [info@kghs.org](mailto:info@kghs.org) and we will get back to you.

## KGHS Board of Directors

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Dewey Livingston, Author