

Kentfield Greenbrae Historical Society

Historian

April 2015 Volume 3, Issue 2

www.kghs.org

info@kghs.org

President's Message

Fingers in the dirt, speckled bits of sun on my back and the verdant leaves and spreading branches of an old oak provide a little shade as I combat the weeds that sprang up after recent (but sparse) rain. As I look up, I can't help but observe that the Greenbrae hills above Sir Francis Drake have changed from grassy knolls studded with oak and manzanita trees into a carefully planned community, with well-kept medians.

So, too, have the Kentfield agricultural vistas changed in the last 85 years: in the excerpt from *In the Heart of Marin* included in this newsletter, Dewey Livingston details the acres of vegetable gardens and flower fields that lined Sir Francis Drake in Kentfield into the 1930's.

These images of the past are a little hard to conjure up when our local travels are punctuated by the sounds of ever-increasing traffic. But, if you have a minute on a warm spring evening, pull to the side of the road and gaze through the lens of our community's history: imagine a garden, see our heritage.

Susan Morrow
KGHS President, 2014-2015

MAY DAY CELEBRATION IN 2016... Not this year!

The Centennial Celebrations seem so far away now, but there was still a great deal of enthusiasm to make it an annual event, on a much smaller scale. After much discussion, the KGHS Board and KSD have decided that an every other year celebration makes more sense. And that is just what we are planning! A May Day celebration **and** community picnic with Maypole dancing, games, music and reunions on Saturday, May 7, 2016.



1909



1954



2014

(photos Courtesy of Anne T. Kent California Room MCFL and the KGHS archives)



Painters of Mt. Tamalpais Presentation March 2015



Roy Farrington Jones captivated close to 100 KGHS members and guests with his slide presentation of the *Paintings of Mt. Tamalpais* at our event in March. Several guests brought along their personal paintings of Mt. Tam and others expressed great interest in having an opportunity to gather more information about their paintings. The KGHS Board will consider another event next year in which residents can share their paintings and get expert feedback on the history of their paintings. We will keep you informed!



Joseph Lee *A Town in Marin County,*
(Kentfield) circa 1870
(RFJ Collection)

Agrarian Kentfield - Fertile Land in the Suburbs

(From *In the Heart of Marin* by Dewey Livingston)

PERHAPS REMARKABLY, Kentfield and Greenbrae remained largely rural well into the twentieth century. Greenbrae's lovely, oak-spotted pastures remained, just as James Ross knew them, for a full half of the new century until post-war progress crossed the Golden Gate. At Kentfield-site of one of the earliest commercial produce farms in Marin County-farmers bent to labor in green fields on either side of the old state highway, well into the era of fast cars.

While current day residents enjoy the surrounding beauty of their suburban community, it's hard to imagine how often people pulled their cars over to the side of the road to photograph, paint, or merely admire the classic country scenes of haystacks, rows of lettuce, colorful flower fields, greenhouses, or black-and-white cows, all with the awesome backdrop of Mt. Tamalpais.



Richard Diener's main growing grounds north of Kent School. The greenhouses were landmarks in Kentfield for many years. The house in the center distance remains on College Avenue as an office building. (Richard Torney Collection)

From around 1818 on, mission cattle grazed all the available pastures, luxuriating in the native grasses. Farming started in the 1840s on Juan Cooper's Mexican land grant where Indian tenants tended to the "cultivation of ... corn, beans, peas, potatoes, barley, wheat, pumpkins and watermelons" in the vicinity of the Ross town border, very likely Granton Park. Theodor Cordua invested heavily in a commercial farm to "victual" visiting whalers and warships in 1846-47; his farm would become Kent Woodlands a century later.



Prominent horticulturalist Richard Diener poses with his wheat crop to show its height, at his leased growing grounds on the Kent estate. (Anne T. Kent California Room, Marin County Free Library)

KGHS Memberships and Renewals

Thank you to all members who have renewed their membership! Many of you who joined in time for our Centennial last May will be getting a renewal notice next month. We hope that you will remember the Kentfield-Greenbrae Historical Society by renewing your membership at a level that is comfortable for you. **DO IT NOW** before you forget!...www.kghs.org

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

You can also send a check: **KGHS Membership, Box 236, Kentfield, CA 94914** Please include your name, level of membership, address, email and phone number.

Even though the last few years were focused on the book publication and Centennial, we still have a lot of plans for the future and need your continued support. We are currently developing curriculum for the K-4 students, planning events, organizing programs such as the Mt. Tamalpais Painters presentation and creating activities, lectures and walks in the community.

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.

Agrarian Kentfield ...continued

Not until Ross Landing had been settled did farms develop that catered to the growing local populace. Giovanni and Luigi Chiappari's 14-acre vegetable garden served the village and points beyond, and while it wasn't known exactly what they grew and whether the farm continued by another operator after they sold it in 1887, theirs was the first known farm of any size in the later nineteenth century. The lower portion of George Butler's fine estate, twelve acres bounded by the creek, the county road and the railroad tracks, served as a picturesque hayfield for many years, at least until 1920.

Albert Kent, who retired to Ross Landing in 1873, proved to be one of the more prominent farmers at Ross Landing. He employed a full time manager and farm workers who planted 20 acres of the former Cordua farm with grapes, grains and vegetables. A dairy provided milk to the Kent estate and its neighbors well into the twentieth century, and the locally famous and beloved annual Grape Festival drew hundreds to the estate to raise funds for a nearby orphanage. Although farming at the Kent estate slowed down after the turn of the century, Lena Corvi Fassi remembered the 1920s and 1930s on the estate: "They had their own little farm, their own little garden," she recalled. "Mr. Capella did all that, not only did he do the flowers, but I think he did the vegetables also." Farming disappeared altogether with the development of Kent Woodlands starting in the 1930s.



The Corvi vegetable farm on College Avenue in 1922, looking towards Kent Woodlands and Hillside Avenue. The Northwestern Pacific Railroad tracks are behind the buildings. (Anne T. Kent California Room, Marin County Free Library)

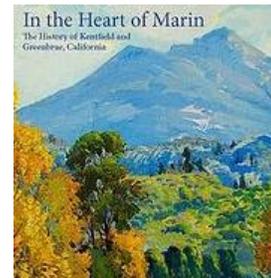
For more information about the Richard Diener Company and Corvi Vegetable Gardens refer to *In the Heart of Marin*: pages 129-135.

If you need to contact us...

Kentfield Greenbrae Historical Society | PO Box 236 | Kentfield | CA | 94914
www.KGHS.org | info@kghs.org | 415-484-5447
www.facebook.com/kentfieldgreenbraehistoricalsociety

In the Heart of Marin: A History of Kentfield and Greenbrae by Dewey Livingston

Books are still available either on-line or by contacting KGHS at info@kghs.org or calling KGHS at 415-484-5447.



Send us your stories...

Our next KGHS Newsletter will feature stories about **Summer Activities** in the heart of Marin. Share your stories about growing up in Marin and the activities that entertained you during the summer months. Send them to: info@kghs.org with the Subject Line "**Summer Stories**," or mail them to the address listed below. Please include the approximate time period in which these activities occurred.

The KGHS Board of Directors

Susan Morrow, President;

Sarah Fletcher
Mary Gilardi
Ross McKenna
Sydney Park,
Josh Rafner
Marilee Rogers
Paula Skov
Heather McPhail Sridharan
Kaki Jacobs Tusler
Richard Torney
Marlies Zeisler

Dewey Livingston, Author

Kentfield Greenbrae Historical Society
P.O. Box 236
Kentfield, CA 94914