

# THE HISTORY OF MUIR BEACH

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## Introduction

This is a report on the history of Muir Beach.

The information was gathered mostly by personal interview. Muir Beach is a small community on the south Marin coast consisting of about 250 people, 50 dogs and 45 horses, by latest count. There are no stores or businesses, just a place for people to live and be. I have lived there for almost 19 years and felt Muir Beach would be a good subject for Marin History because I am so well acquainted with the people and the place.

## Indian Days - Early Settlers

The Indians were at Muir Beach for at least 200 years, from the early 16th century to the late 18th century. They lived in the flat area near the lagoon and on the surrounding hills. They were Miwok Indians. There may have been one large tribe or several smaller ones, but they left mounds behind which were the burial grounds and garbage dumps of the tribes. Two have been found - one in Wheelwright's cow field and one by the old tavern. Indians also lived all up along Redwood Creek and probably in Muir Woods. They were roaming types and stopped to camp wherever they found fish and game and shelter.

The Indians were run off by the early settlers who were mostly Spanish and Portuguese. The settlers brought diseases with them. I don't know where the Indians went when they were

driven off, perhaps inland or perhaps they all died off. The Spanish had illegal trade with the Indians.

The Russians came down from the North Coast looking for otter in San Francisco Bay and founded Fort Ross in the early 1800's. It is quite likely that they could have come into Muir Beach because it is a safe harbor for landing and close to San Francisco.

In 1838 an Englishman named Richardson applied to Spain for a grant to the Sausalito Rancho, of which Muir Beach was a part. The Spanish probably had not settled at Muir Beach. Richardson ran cattle and grew produce on his ranch and there were probably tenants of his who farmed near Muir Beach in the middle of the 19th century. The Portuguese first came in the early 1800's. They worked in the dairy ranches then established in the large Ranchos. There was a dairy ranch at the entrance to Muir Beach called Golden Gate Dairy. They made cream. There were milk cows at Slide Ranch nearby and in Green Gulch. An Italian family named Banducci settled nearby and grew flowers. The community life was developed by the Portuguese along the lines that they knew in the Azores. Many of these families still live there today in much the same style.

### Prohibition Days - 1919 to 1933

There was illegal liquor brought into Muir Beach during Prohibition. Because of the easy landing on the beach, people could row out to ships and bring back gin and whiskey for the San Francisco speakeasys.

Before the tavern was built and during the summers, Albert Silva used to come to Muir Beach on weekends and sell ice cream, soda water, root beer and ice to people who came to the beach and to hikers who came down the hills by way of the big Eucalyptus and Redwood trees. Clayton Bello supplied the money to build the tavern and Anthony Nunes Bello, a relative, built it. A Mr. Ponte, whose family still lives at Muir Beach, hauled the lumber from the Smith Lumber Company on Third Street in San Francisco in 1919. Tony Founce operated the tavern and hotel, which consisted of a large hall, a kitchen and dining room. People from town stayed overnight, and for a time it was very nice with fine linen and good food. There was even a gas station on the corner of the highway.

About 1927 a man named James Weil came from New York, saw the possibilities of Muir Beach, planted hundreds of Pine trees along the roads and tried to develop a supply of good water. Clayton Bello had subdivided Muir Beach at this time and the original subdivision map was filed under the name of Bello Beach. Mr. Weil planned to subdivide more of the land and prepared maps for this purpose but they were never recorded. Before the name of Bello Beach, the area was called Big Lagoon because of the marshlands which existed where Wheelwright's pasture and the Alder forest are now located. During the 1920's and 1930's the beach was used mostly by people who hiked over from Mill Valley. The roads then were unpaved, narrow and rugged. The few homes were just summer cabins and remained that way until about 1940. It wasn't until then, during and after World War II, that Wheelwright and other English-speaking families began to buy land and occupy the cabins and houses. There was a toll gate at the beginning of the Muir Woods road. Mr. Weil built little cabins around the tavern to accommodate overnight guests. Cabin No. 1 was the office of Mr. Weil and his partner Mr. Harris.

### World War II - 1940 to 1950

In 1940 the name Bello Beach was changed to Muir Beach. The military base at the County Overlook was built at the beginning of the war in 1942. Its purpose was an observation post and there were tunnels going underground to connect the bunkers. These still remain although they are closed off. Cables ran from the Overlook down across Little Beach and underwater to Fort Cronkhite at the Golden Gate. Homes at Muir Beach were used to house the officers and men. The old Montague house was a barrack and mess hall. The other houses were rented by shipyard workers from Marinship in Sausalito.

Al Santos, whose family owned Green Gulch Ranch, was a test pilot during the war. Other families moved to Muir Beach at that time. The Nortons moved there in 1945. Tom worked at Marinship. They bought their house from a retired sea captain who had also worked in a mine in Minnesota. Charles Brooks helped the Nortons make the house liveable, as their house like most of the Muir Beach houses then was very wet and muddy in the wintertime.

The tavern had then been unoccupied for a few years and in 1945 it, along with the beach and cabins was purchased by Dr. John and Lucienne O'Brien. They bought it from James Weil and Lucia Harris. They remodeled it and again tried to establish a resort. There was much drinking and many after-hours parties.

### Present Days - 1950 to 1970

The people who settled in Muir Beach before 1950 usually came because it looked like living would be cheap. They tried growing vegetables and fished the ocean and the stream and caught deer and quail. They gathered driftwood from the beach to build with. There was an old couple who made a dish called "beach soup" which consisted of findings which had washed up on the beach.

Living was primitive by today's standards. A house slid off the cliff on Sunset Way. There were many close calls with fire and two houses burned. In 1958 a house which had been owned and occupied by Joe Eugenia burned and before that a cabin out on the cliff owned by a couple named Westerberg burned. There was no fire protection and the water was always bad, but there was a quality of living which had gone. There are now houses on the hill in a new subdivision called Seacape in which my dad is involved. I am against it. This poem expresses my feeling:

The walk is a long one from the end of the trees to the top of the hill.  
It seemed that a person could walk forever on the old fire road and never  
get to the top.  
But that was long ago.

In 1962 and 1963 three houses were built just above the level of the trees, and in 1966 Seacape was started. There are now twelve houses on this hill somewhat separated but still there.

In 1963 the O'Briens sold the tavern to a group of Mill Valley people headed by Stuart Dole and including the Greensfelders and Hughes Call, Robert Royston and Asa Hanamoto. They remodeled the tavern and tried many ideas to make the enterprise successful: first a store which did not get enough patronage, then a restaurant which served very good food and did well for awhile but then started to fade out. A few of the cabin people then made articles to sell in the tavern.

In 1967 a young man who called himself Buddha held two large parties at the tavern which were attended by thousands of young people. He brought in the big Bay Area bands: Grateful Dead, Charlestons, Big Brother, Quicksilver and others. The Clover and the Circus got their start at the tavern. Buddha's parties were peaceful and orderly, but in 1968 the bad days started. Two North Beach characters named Dino and Carlo leased the tavern and attracted freaks from San Francisco, offered loud music and started nudity. The situation became so bad that a wealthy Marin County person offered the State the sum of \$125,000 to match funds so that the State could acquire the Beach for a public park. The acquisition was finally accomplished in January 1969 and soon thereafter the State moved in and tore down the tavern and the cabins and chased everybody off the beach. There is now a gate at the entrance and control over the beach.

One of the main reasons Muir Beach had never developed to any extent was because of the very bad water. It is rusty, turns dark if it sits, tastes bad and usually has a high bacteria count. Although a Community Service District was formed to improve the water, nothing was ever done about it. Then Seacape was developed, they drilled a new well in Frank's Valley and brought good water to the hill, but the old community was against all this and tried to stop it. Most people, though, took water from the Seacape pipes for their own use. Now finally, it seems that there may be an agreement whereby all will share in the good water.

And now more and more people are finding this little valley by the sea, hidden away in the trees. It is a very nice place to live, quiet and peaceful most of the time. The people are all friendly and warm. It has always been like this in the past and will continue to be so in the future, I hope.

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