



THE MONTECITO AREA
RESIDENTS' ASSOCIATION

The MARA News

October-November 2002

Montecito Area Residents' Association
P.O. Box 150266
San Rafael, CA 94915-0266

Time for a Change of Face: The San Rafael Canal—Waterway or Walkway?

The next time you're traveling under the 101 freeway overpass at Third Street, cast a glance at the tidal ditch you're crossing over.

Imagine, if you will, numbers of bathers luxuriating there at the turn of the last century, enjoying outdoor swimming. In fact, a 40' × 100' covered swimming facility, the San Rafael Municipal Bath House, was built over the same area, near the junction of today's Third and Irwin streets.

This "pool" was popular throughout the 1920s, finally closing in 1929.

In case you don't believe me, you can find the era chronicled in a series of remarkable photographs in Frank L. Keegan's book *San Rafael, Marin's Mission City*, available at the public library.

2020 Foresight

Over the years, many changes have occurred in the surrounding geography. Until last January, when Del Hallett and I attended a City of San Rafael-sponsored design charette for the 2020 General Plan, I never gave the San Rafael Canal much thought—it was just part of the scene. It merely formed the southern boundary of our Montecito-Happy Valley neighborhood. However, two Saturdays of these group discussions brought to light its historic role and the pressing need to find funds for dredging, to sustain it as a usable waterway.

In general, concerns were voiced that access for Canal Area residents needed to be improved, both for shoppers and for students attending San Rafael High. The roundabout route presently used, a long stretch of East Francisco Boulevard, and the narrow, unprotected walkway of the Grand Avenue bridge, runs adjacent to fast-moving traffic, and safety is another clear concern.

The Ghost of Transformations Past —A Thumbnail Review of the Canal's History

In my research relative to those concerns, I came across some interesting excerpts which characterize the changing location and status of the canal:

- "Before the advent of the railroad, old San Rafael Creek extended to what is now C Street." (*Marin Journal*)
- "Various men ran schooners or barges from San Rafael to San Francisco, and most of the freight between those points was handled in this manner." (*Marin Journal*)
- "In 1937 a movement was started to establish a bathing beach on the north side of the Canal near the San Rafael High School, but after some work was done, and considerable sand hauled in to make a beach, the proposition was dropped as impracticable." (*Marin Journal*)
- "[T]he Canal ends at Irwin Street and the upper section is lined with wharves and warehouses." (*Marin Journal*, 1938)
- "The San Rafael Canal, with the potential for being one of the City's finest assets, is incredibly ugly. Something must be done." (Joanne Grant, *Marin Independent Journal*, December 1969)

(Ms. Grant goes on to tell how East San Rafael businessmen, members of the Chamber of Commerce, suggested improvements but received only a weak response from individual property owners. The City investigated getting State aid to build a public boat-launch area with an adjacent recreation area for parkless East San Rafael. Even though funds were not available, studies continued.)
- "[The waterway]" soon may get a facelift to improve its unattractive appearance—if community organizations get their way." ("Future Bright for Canal Area," *Marin IJ*, May 1974, an article that documented much of the canal's history)

Déjà Vu

Over the decades, it seems, the same issues have been addressed repeatedly, with essentially the same outcome each time. I think one particular statement (from that same May 1974 *IJ* article) says it all, even for us today: **“In what is recognized today as a serious planning error, businesses on the canal, including the Montecito Shopping Center, turned their backs to the waterway.”**

A Stoppag Solution for the Present

Because residents and representatives from the City of San Rafael lobbied aggressively, the federal government recently allocated the necessary funds for dredging the canal. However, the government is unwilling to pay for future dredging unless marine-related business on the order of \$10 million annually is generated along the canal. In the ten years since the waterway was last dredged, so much silt has accumulated that at low tide the depth of the water is only one foot. To relieve this situation, dredging is scheduled to begin (near Pickleweed Park) about the end of August 2002, but of only the center 60 feet of the channel.

The Future, According to YOU

At present the City is meeting with representatives from all city areas to formulate a new General Plan, which, once established, will be in effect until the year 2020.

To lodge your comments and suggestions, go online to the www.cityofsanrafael.org Web site and click on “General Plan 2020.” For example, what do you envision as solutions to the following:

- How could we bring more marine-related businesses (such as a hotel with a marina?) into the Canal Area to generate sufficient business income and thereby ensure that dredging would continue in the future?
- How could business owners be motivated to stop “turning their back to” the canal and to landscape the adjacent waterfront? (Short of landscaping with kudzu, how does one economically beautify a quonset hut?)
- Do we add a pedestrian bridge outside the present Grand Avenue bridge? Do we erect a protective barrier along the present walkway? (Bridging the canal at another location was discussed, but design restrictions and cost make it infeasible. However, if the canal cannot be dredged regularly, in a few years

we’ll be able to walk across, and the waterway will be either a waterfowl sanctuary or a parking lot!)

- Can we create a Montecito Area park adjacent to the Canal? (Participants in the design charette envisioned a “river walk” along the canal similar to the one in San Antonio.)

Over thirty years ago, residents acknowledged the same problems we have today, and failed to solve them. Will the year 2020 see an improvement? Or will planners of the *next* General Plan face even more deterioration of the canal? In short, what can we do to make this eyesore eye-catching?

—Lynn Mason

MARA Launches Its \$ Second Successful Yard Sale

On Saturday, September 28, MARA held its Second Annual Neighborhood Yard Sale, a lively all-day event with over 30 households on the map. Around 9:00 a.m., four sales on Grand Avenue drew so much traffic that there was a jamup because of so many drivers looking for parking!

Beforehand, to let the public know about the event, MARA placed a paid ad in the *IJ* and, as well, received free publication for two consecutive weeks in the *IJ*’s Marin section. Flyers were distributed throughout the neighborhood and in nearby areas. On the day of the event, a couple of MARA volunteers cheerfully drove around to every participating household and delivered balloons to help mark the sites.

As expected, offered articles included everything from puzzles and games to clothing, antiques, household appliances, and large pieces of furniture. Reports from various quarters indicate the sale was a financial success for the households involved.

Many thanks to everyone who participated, and especially to those who volunteered additional time to make this event a success.

If you would like to have your household participate in MARA’s *Third* Annual Neighborhood Yard Sale (about the same time next year), let us know and we’ll put you on the list.

—Jackie Deane

THE ABCs OF A SUCCESSFUL BLOCK PARTY

by Lynn Mason and A. E. Ross

ACTION STEPS

Sid and Catherine Waxman got things rolling by first clearing the event with the City of San Rafael and then putting out flyers so that people in the neighborhood could involve themselves in the details and planning.

BALLOON/DÉCOR DETAIL & AFTERPARTY CLEANUP

To give the street a festive look, **Linda Comella** put up colorful balloons and party decorations all along the street. **Rob Lamb** and **Maureen McGuigan** helped with setup, takedown, and recycling. And, in general, everyone cheerfully helped with pickup and cleanup.

CONVERSATION HUB AND ART SHOW

Glenn Smith and Lin Rose's driveway became the central gathering point for the party, where the main food tables were set up potluck style and people could sit and socialize. As well, **Sharon Skolnick** and **Bruce Bagnoli** had their artwork and photographs on display there.

DELECTABLES

Alastair Cumming and **Dan Wadleigh** barbecued Chicken and Turkey Sausages, **Gail Grant** brought delicious homemade Chicken Satay, and **Laurel Fontana** provided a heavenly California Trifle she made.

At three o'clock they started arriving. Eventually, 79 neighbors signed in, and more showed up later.

Needless to say, this first annual Lower Jewell Street block party was a great success. It gave neighbors an opportunity to get better acquainted, or even acquainted in the first place—it turns out that some had lived near one another for any number of years but had never actually met.

Pennants and balloons were flying and the summer weather was perfect. There was great food to enjoy, and people could make new friends, exchange ideas, view artwork and photographs, participate in games, and even go on well-organized garden tours. The day became a true celebration, and many people lingered several hours past the official ending time of seven o'clock.

MARA looks forward to seeing the next neighborhood block party happen, wherever in the Montecito Area that might be. MARA is glad to offer support, even in terms of some financial assistance, if necessary (although in this case none was required, as neighbors contributed whatever was needed), and can offer ideas and experience to others in the neighborhood who would like to create a special day in their immediate vicinity.

EAR CONFECTIONERY

Walt Robinson generously provided and set up the sound equipment for the event, and **Bob McAllister** did a great job of programming the music that was played throughout the day.

FLYERS, INVITATIONS, AND RSVPs

After the invitations went out for the Saturday, July 20, event, **Marianne Wadleigh** diligently and enthusiastically followed up and took care of coordinating the neighborhood RSVPs.

GARDEN TOURS

Marianne Wadleigh organized and led guided tours of four beautifully landscaped residential gardens (of **Alastair and Susan Cumming**, **Karl and Marianne Wadleigh**, **Matt and Pat Guthrie**, and **Glenn Smith and Lin Rose**) specially opened up for the block party. Neighbors on these tours had a good time exchanging both practical and aesthetic ideas and enjoyed getting to know each other better.

KIDWATCH

Throughout the day, 11-year-old **Hayley McAllister** conscientiously cared for the littler ones in the neighborhood and helped make the day fun and special for them as well.

NECESSARY DETAILS

Alastair and Susan Cumming contributed graphics work—printed signs and tricolor pennants to place on the street and signal the event—and made the vital Costco run for food and beverages.

RAFFLE AND GAMES

Hayley McAllister created and organized various games, activities, and prizes. One challenge was to guess the number of debris boxes **Paul and Sharon Sterling** had used in remodeling their home (27 to date!). The three-legged races held at the **Waxmans'** driveway had everyone laughing.

Come Have Fun and Make a Local Difference

Cory Bytof, Volunteer Program Manager for the City of San Rafael (485-3407), advises us that we can expect to see a new name—Neighborhood Beautification Days—for our semiannual (October and April) neighborhood cleanup days this year. That's because the program is now being expanded to include other types of projects we in the neighborhoods consider vital. As well as generally sprucing up the common areas, this could mean special painting projects, landscaping, and so on, and community input is both welcome and invited. ↗

This fall's upcoming Neighborhood Beautification Days happen on **October 26 and 27, the last weekend of the month**, with a special focus on Make a Difference Day, Saturday the 26th.

Like to Join MARA?

To become a member (through May 2003), send a \$10 check (\$5 for seniors) payable to "Montecito Area Residents' Association" and mail it to MARA at P.O. Box 150266, San Rafael, CA 94915-0266. Members should either be residents of the Montecito area or retail, commercial, or other organizations located in the neighborhood.

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