

Before Kent Woodlands Was Born: The Kents

Most of us know that the Kent family bought the land on which we live many years ago and that the family was involved with the early history of Kentfield. But few of us other than the long time residents know much more about how Kent Woodlands came to be what it is today. In the next few newsletters, I will try to amuse you with that story. The account is based largely on documents and recollections contained in the Kent Family Collections in the California Room of the Marin Public Library, with the invaluable assistance of its librarian, Laurie Thompson, plus the help of a few of those long timers, other bits and pieces of information, and memory.

It all started with Albert and Adaline (not Adeline) Kent. Albert grew up in Connecticut in the 1830s and 40s, and went to Yale (all the Kent men did). According to his son William's account, after graduation he was "extremely poor", "owning nothing but a college education and a dress suit." But he was an attractive and ambitious young man, with a "brilliant mind" and considerable charm (In his later years he was noted for his unshakable honesty and integrity.)

After a financial setback while still in his 20s, he wired his fiancée: "Have lost everything. Will you marry me at once?" Three days later Albert and Adaline were married. They lived together for over 40 years.

Many adjectives have been used by her niece and daughter-in-law to describe Adaline – impulsive, independent, sociable, outspoken, sometimes a bit blunt and overbearing, but gracious, warm, wise, and with a fine sense of humor. Even in his later years, she "could always amuse Albert" – and get her way.

By the time Albert was 40, they were a wealthy couple. Albert owned the largest meat packing plant in Chicago, and had a number of other business interests. But about that time, he suffered what was called a "breakdown", an "obscure malady", "never understood by any doctor." It left him a semi-invalid, rather gloomy, and with "a dread of meeting people."

On the advice of his doctors, he started travelling to the West to find a more suitable climate for his health – a favored medical treatment in those days for certain untreatable ailments.

Albert was in California on one of those trips when he learned of the Great Chicago Fire of 1871. He sent for Adaline and their young son William (their first-born son had died at the age of two), and they moved into temporary quarters in San Rafael to look for a suitable new home.

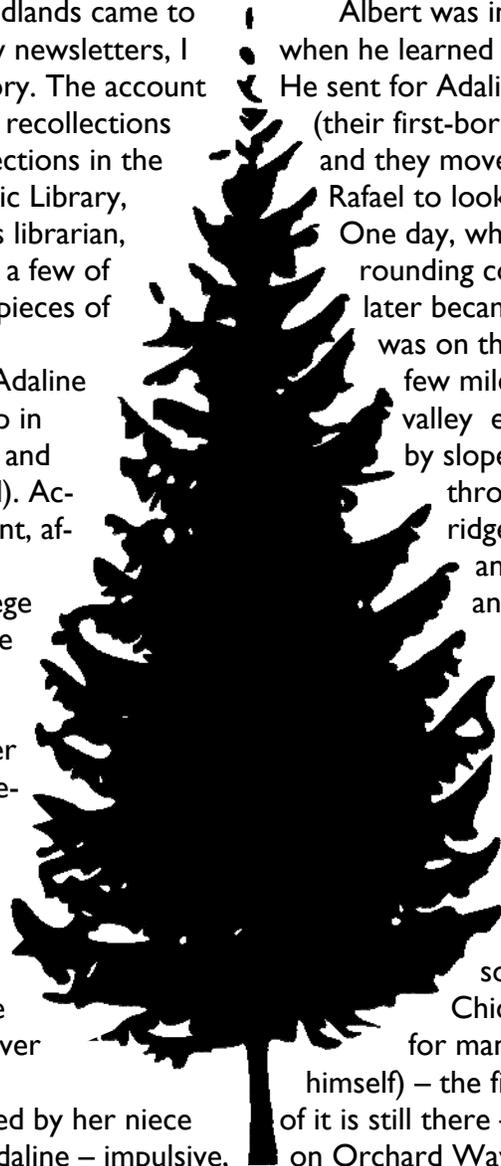
One day, while on a carriage ride in the surrounding countryside, Adaline came upon what later became Kent Woodlands. The property was on the edge of a bottom land stretching a few miles to the Bay. It led into a narrow valley extending for about a mile, flanked by slopes on either side, then ascending through wooded hills all round to a ridgeline overlooking Mount Tamalpais and miles of pristine wooded canyon and valley.

Of course, Adaline saw only a bit of that wonderful scenery from her carriage. But it was enough. On her return home, according to family legend she told Albert she had found "paradise". Albert promptly bought 13 acres of that land, and later over 800 more.

In 1872, Throop Richardson, Albert's Superintendent at the Chicago plant and his loyal employee for many more years, built a house (for himself) – the first house in the Woodlands. Part of it is still there – a section of a lovely, gabled house on Orchard Way. A year or so later, Albert and Adaline moved into their home at what is now 200 Woodland Road, also built by Throop (a talented man).

The Kents – Albert, then his son William, then his son Roger, together with their families, lived in that house (with a number of additions and renovations) for over 100 years.

— by Paul Homrighausen



Before Kent Woodlands Was Born: The Estate Years, 1870s to 1930s

Albert and Adaline Kent's new home was on the western fringe of Ross Landing, a settlement of 30 to 40 houses, a few commercial enterprises, including the inevitable saloon, and a nearby lumber yard and brick kiln or two. It existed largely because of the fact that, in those days, the Corte Madera Creek was navigable by large flat-bottomed schooners up to a wharf where the bridge on College Avenue is now. The schooners would take on lumber and bricks there for building in San Francisco.

A year or so after the Kents' arrival, a North Pacific Coast Railroad train began running through the settlement, from San Anselmo to Corte Madera. Albert gave land for a station; it was located where the gas station between Kent and College Avenues is now. Long timers might remember it as a Shell station in the 1970s, run by the Minto brothers, whose grandfather was the stationmaster. Roger, Albert's grandson, remembered as a boy taking a train from that station through the Corte Madera tunnel (still there, but closed off) to Sausalito and the ferry to San Francisco.

The neighboring Kent estate was called Tamalpais. In the years following Albert and Adaline's settling there, the inhabited part covered about 20 acres above what is now Woodland Road, from its Kent Avenue border up to Laurel Way.

In addition to the Kent house and that of Throop Richardson (great name), the estate superintendent, there were a carriage house, a barn (8 Laurel Way), quarters for the kitchen help (now at 10 Laurel Way), and a guest house (12 Laurel Way). A few other Kent family houses were built in that compound in later years, including Elizabeth Kent's house at 131 Goodhill, and Roger and Alice's honeymoon house at 1 Laurel Way. (Thanks to our Harley Jessup for all that house information.)

The property also contained an apple and pear orchard (Orchard Way – there's still an orchard there) and several vineyards (Orchard and Vineyard Way). In addition, with the help of John McLaren of Golden Gate Park fame, the reclusive Albert planted many cedars, redwoods and other trees. There were quite a number of servants and employees.

The rest of the estate – over 800 acres – remained uninhabited and, except for some trails, in its natural state, bordering on a vast expanse of wooded hills and canyons on its western border – just as Adaline had found it.

By the time of Albert's death in 1901, Ross Landing had become a more middle class place called Kentfield; it even had a few grand mansions. In 1908, Adaline gave about 30 acres for a recreational and community center: the land is the site of the A.E.Kent Middle School (celebrating its centennial in 2014) and the College of Marin gymnasium and a playing field.

By the time of her death in 1914, Adaline's son William was well known as a conservationist and philanthropist. In creating the estate, Albert had acquired many hundreds of acres of land. William also acquired many hundreds of acres in Marin County, and gave almost all of it away – 204 acres in Steep Ravine, to help form Mt. Tamalpais State Park, more to the Water District at its inception, and a priceless grove of redwoods he had bought to save from the saws and axes of a lumber company.

His wife Elizabeth recalled that, when she asked about the advisability of the purchase of the grove – they were already heavily in debt – William replied: "If we lost all the money we have and saved those trees, it would be worthwhile, wouldn't it?" Elizabeth did not record her response. But she was an admirable woman, and they had a very strong marriage.

William gave the grove to Teddy Roosevelt and the U.S. Teddy felt that it should bear William's name, but William insisted on naming it for his friend (and frequent visitor here) John Muir.

William died in 1928. At that time, except for some changes in the family enclave, the estate remained as it had always been. Six years later, with William looking down on them from above, his children decided to begin subdividing and selling it. Of course, we don't know what William would have said about that decision. And we don't know how difficult the decision was. But we do know that it was to be no ordinary residential development.

— by Paul Homrighausen

Kent Woodlands and its Association: Their Early Years

The Kent family adopted certain basic principles for development in what they had named Kent Woodlands. Houses should not disturb the natural terrain and should take into account the location of other houses to provide privacy: lot size and shape were to depend on the house siting, with roads to be built after the lot lines were drawn.

The first deed restrictions (CC&Rs), filed in 1934, stated that “the subdividers...are pledged to the development and maintenance of a residential area of an atmosphere and charm entirely distinctive and individual...” Under the terms of that document, the Kents controlled selection of an Architectural Committee, which would administer and enforce the restrictions. The Committee would be subject to community takeover as the development matured.

The first subdivision map, dated April 6, 1936, showed 28 parcels running on both sides of Rancheria, below Adaline (now Woodland) Road and along Magnolia to Murray Lane. The first house was built in 1937. Today, as you enter the Woodlands, you drive right by it, look right at it, and never know it's there. It's a striking Maybeck Tudor (thanks, Martha).

The next subdivisions moved on below Woodland to the Evergreen Road area as far as South Ridgewood, and to North Ridgewood (Nancy Kent Danielson, Roger's daughter, recalled that, when she was young, Woodland Road ended there).

A 1940 marketing piece referred to “illuminated roads” and “underground utilities.” That's how it was in the first subdivisions – and still is. A 1941 piece touted the Woodlands' “hiking and saddle trails”, and the easy commute by rail or car, with no stop lights from the new bridge to the development. It also mentioned stables, and a grove of giant Redwoods (probably behind Sonia's house on Woodland).

After World War II and into the 1960s, a number of houses were designed or landscaped by noted architects of that era – our Mario Ciampi, Larry Halprin and Joe Esherrick. And there was Thomas Church, William Wurster and others. Our Harley Jessup compiled a list of about 30 of those houses – another terrific effort.

Most are (or were) in the first subdivisions, or on Diablo, Laurel or Orchard Way, off lower Goodhill, in or close to what had been the family enclave. Some are a bit farther out – on Live Oak, Acorn or Buckeye Way, or Goodhill beyond the widow Elizabeth's house at 131. A few of the early ones are out even farther – a 1947 house at 465 Woodland, a 1950 house at 509, a 1951 house up on 101 Crown, and four on Spring.

There is another Wurster house on Vineyard Way (thanks, Maryanna). And, of course, many other houses, some of them also notable – from multi-story mansions to modest ranch style houses – were also built during that period and later.

By 1966, there were 18 subdivisions. In that year, the Kent Woodlands Property Owners Association was formed with the Kent family's approval. In the next few years, the family relinquished control of the development, just as they had planned at its inception, and the new Association took over the tasks of applying and enforcing the CC&Rs' design and land use standards.

It also began acting as mediator-arbiter in resolving neighbor disputes. And there have been some lusus. One involved a tiger up on Crown. The owner kept it tethered but uncaged. The CC&Rs of that time prohibited keeping chickens, but said nothing about tigers. Even Hal Brown was stumped, as I recall. And the neighbors...

Through its elected Board and its committees the Association also dealt with more significant matters. It became the recognized spokesperson for and representative of what had become the Woodlands community. In that role it addressed issues of common concern in consultation with our Supervisors and County agencies. In her newsletter articles on past Association presidents, Daly Schreck has alluded to a number of those issues and individuals who have worked to resolve them.

The most challenging issue of all emerged in the late 1970s. It threatened to turn the Woodlands into just another (not so) high end residential development. There appeared to be no way to resolve it.

— by Paul Homrighausen

Kent Woodlands: The Last Thirty Years

In late 1980, a County Land Use Report stated that 534 houses had been built on 20 subdivisions in the Woodlands, with 15 lots remaining undeveloped and two large parcels unsubdivided. It noted that “despite substantial development, the natural environment remains the dominant character of the community.” But it also noted, ominously, that while each of those subdivisions at the time of its creation had similar CC&Rs, a few of the earliest ones had expired and others would soon expire. In addition, a number of parcels had never been made a part of any subdivision.

As a result, about 30% of Woodlands properties were not covered by any CC&Rs. That percentage would almost certainly increase over time. And County zoning was not designed to protect the distinctive character of the Woodlands development. How could there be a happy ending to this story?

It wasn't easy. But one big step in that direction was taken in 1984. Largely through the extraordinary efforts of the County planner (fortunately, also our own member) Mary Summers, the County adopted a land use policy specifically for Kent Woodlands, more attuned to its special character. That policy has been updated with the help of the Association in more recent years.

Still, the membership issue remained very troubling. Neither County design and land use rules for the Woodlands nor their application by the County would always be in step with the community's rules or their application by its Association. In addition, with a gradual decline in membership, the sense of community, and the Association's dual role as administrator of the community's own rules and as its representative and voice with County Supervisors and agencies, would also gradually be diminished – no happy ending yet; it was still some years away.

In 1995, the potential for further decline in membership was finally halted. With the approval of its members, the Association completed consolidation of the various subdivision CC&Rs into one, with an indefinite duration – an epic endeavor.

Of equal importance, in recent years many non-members – one by one by one by one -- have elected to join the Association, voluntarily subjecting their own property to the new C&Rs for the common benefit and the protection of the Woodlands environment. William and Elizabeth would have understood – it's not about getting to use the Woodlands parking lot – and applauded. Today, there are well over 100 additional members, with the percentage of non-members cut in

half and growing smaller.

Two other significant issues relating to property development here arisen in recent years. The first involved the possibility of lot splits, with its risk of undermining basic principles in the creation of the Woodlands. This issue was resolved with the County's help by limiting possible splits to a relatively few bigger lots.

The second came with the good times of the 1990s. It involved a marked increase in the number of applications for tear-downs, to be replaced by much larger houses (“mega-houses”), and the difficulty in applying basic CC&R concepts such as preservation of privacy and “woodland character” to resolve the resulting conflicts. This problem was largely “solved” by the recession beginning in 2008, at least for the present.

Apart from those and a few other, sporadic problems, the history of the Woodlands in recent years has been the story of the month in-month out work of the Association's Architectural Committee and the County cooperatively applying their rules, guidelines and principles to a world of ever changing tastes and times (and occasional bad tempers), and in protecting the Woodlands “character” – hats off to them.

The Woodlands is over 75 now and, inevitably, some aspects of that character have changed in those years. The halcyon days of bridle paths winding through the canyons and into the hills are long gone. Gone, too – and not that long ago – are the days of open landscapes with hardly a fence in sight, and the nights of mysteriously dark roads with hardly a gate light shining. And today, maybe one or two houses are just a bit too big for their settings, just a bit too intrusive, and maybe a few lights just a bit too bright.

But, thanks to the efforts of Mother Nature and quite a few humans as well, the Woodlands' most distinctive qualities – its trees, hills and views, fine houses and their great variety, and the sense of privacy and of nature's presence, with our benign mountain as a backdrop – are still very much with us.

* * * * *

That's the story of the Woodlands – so far. It gets more mundane as we get closer to the present – no elusive Albert, or extraordinary William, or exemplary Elizabeth. But, if you use your imagination, you may still be able to catch a glimpse of Adaline riding by in her carriage. I have.

— by Paul Homrighausen