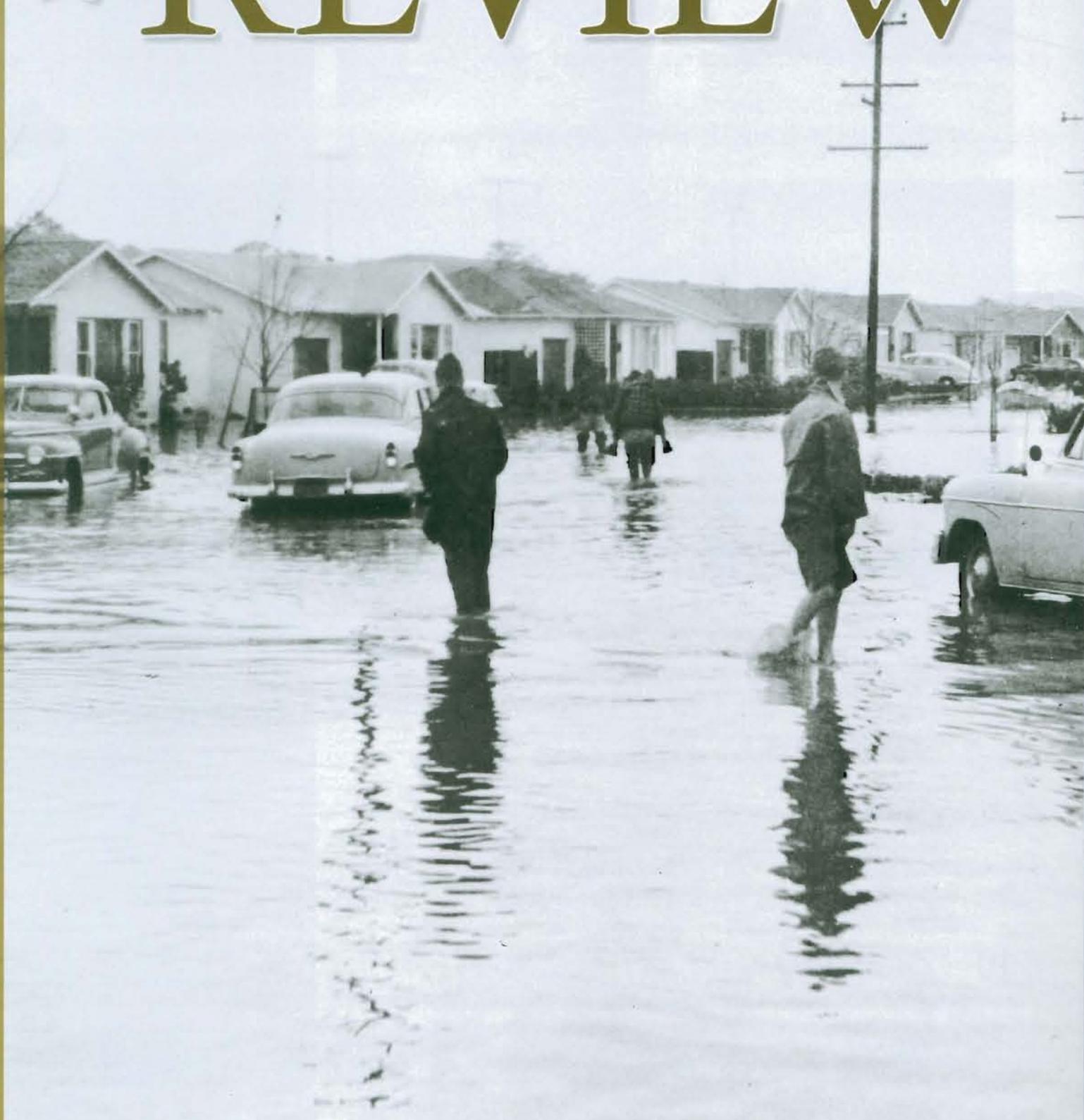


THE MILL VALLEY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

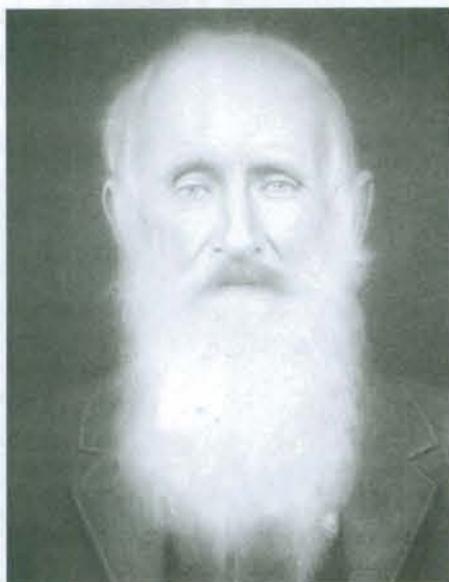
REVIEW



Spring 2006

*Over a Century of Flooding
Martin Powers Barber Augustus Kempf 300 East Pillsbury
Builder Gus Cassipm*

Contents



Doing her best
to serve you promptly

3 *Over a Century of Flooding in Mill Valley*

One of the first public records of flooding in Mill Valley was from 1889, when a surveying crew . . . sought higher ground at Lovell and Madrona Avenues due to huge amounts of water rushing down from Cascade Canyon.

8 *Charles Auguste Lauff*

"The country around Mill Valley and Muir Woods was covered with immense trees and was the home of large black and brown bears. The elk were thick as bees on the flat in front of (where) Mill Valley (is located today) . . . The cattle were as plentiful as the elk and deer."

10 *Gus Costigan*

You may not be familiar with his name, but you'll probably recognize the indelible imprint that he left on Mill Valley when you learn of the buildings, both businesses and residences, that he built or remodeled here.

14 *300 East Blithedale*

Mill Valley's local telephone office and how it came to be built.

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GENE STOCKING.

A founder of the
Mill Valley Historical Society
and a long-time board member,
Gene is a tireless volunteer
whose curiosity and knowledge
about Mill Valley history
continues to inspire others.

Over a Century of Flooding in Mill Valley

ONE COULD NAVIGATE A BOAT ALONG
THE INNER REACHES OF RICHARDSON BAY
ACROSS FROM TAMALPAIS HIGH SCHOOL



MILL VALLEY BIKE PATH AT HIGH TIDE

One of the first public records of flooding in Mill Valley was from 1889, when a surveying crew camped at Throckmorton and Miller Avenues, sought higher ground at Lovell and Madrona Avenues due to huge amounts of water rushing down from Cascade Canyon. Lucretia Little, Deputy City Clerk and Official City Historian for the City of Mill Valley, wrote about this event in her *Informal History of the Mill Valley, California Flood Plain* in 1971.

Little described the dramatic impact that silt from the hydraulic gold mining of the Sierra Nevada in the mid 19th century had when it washed down to San Francisco and Richardson Bays. Additionally, there was no building oversight in Mill Valley until the first zoning ordinance in 1935 and the establishment of the Mill Valley Planning Commission in 1942. Bulkheads for roads and streets had not yet been built to accommodate the proper diversion of water. High tides and steady rain added to the environmental changes and flooding was inevitable. In 1890, a reservoir in Cascade Canyon was constructed for water collection, but was probably the first attempt at flood control in Mill Valley.

What was once bay became marsh, which was later filled to accommodate new building. One could navigate a boat along the inner reaches of Richardson Bay across from Tamalpais High School where there is now a retirement center and condominiums.

In the February 1925 flood, Little reported having seen huge redwood trees that moved upright along the creek from Marion Avenue to Cascade Drive. A home on Ethel Avenue slid down to



MILLER AVE & MONTFORD, 1945



VALLEY CIRCLE



MILLER AVE & CAMINO ALTO



MILLER AVE BETWEEN CAMINO ALTO & VALLEY CIRCLE

ALL HISTORICAL FLOOD PHOTOS — COURTESY OF MILL VALLEY PUBLIC LIBRARY HISTORY ROOM; CURRENT PHOTOS — JEFF DAVIDSON

Miller Avenue as a result of those storms. And, the Mill Valley Record reported that a warehouse from the Mill Valley Lumber Company was washed into Corte Madera Creek. Residents helped by clearing the lumber that had choked the stream at Millwood and Miller just below Wildwood, the Finn home at 160 Miller.

Flood photos abound in the Lucretia Little History Room at the Mill Valley Public Library, and they tell similar stories of constant rain for days or record rainfalls in a short period of time, along with high tides. The combination is not unusual and has happened frequently in the past 100 years, including late 2005.

While continued flooding occurs today, it is usually in the Locust Avenue business district and further east. The Corte Madera and Warner Creeks both contribute to flooding around Locust and Sycamore Avenues. And, the Widow Reed and Ryan Creeks contribute to the flooding east of there.

**THERE WAS RARELY A YEAR
IN THE 1940'S AND 50'S WHERE
SOME FLOODING WASN'T REPORTED.**

There was rarely a year in the 1940's and 50's where some flooding wasn't reported. Flooding in 1945 and 1955-56 was extensive, particularly in the Locust area and east. In the 1955 flooding, gale force winds of up to 80 miles an hour ripped roofs off homes that had been pelted with twelve inches of rain in two days.

In January of 1970, access to Highway 101 from and to Mill Valley was cut off after thirteen days of successive rain. And, in 1979, parents stormed a City Council meeting when children from the Mill Valley Middle School had been allowed to leave the school in waist deep water. Improvements were subsequently made to the Ryan Creek sewage pipes to prevent flooding there. Five inches of rain within 24 hours had been recorded, again, along with high tides.



ETHEL BRIDGE (BEFORE)



ETHEL BRIDGE (AFTER)



SYCAMORE AVENUE & VALLEY CIRCLE



CREEK NEAR MILLER AVE & VALLEY CIRCLE



MILLER AVENUE & VALLEY CIRCLE



MILLER AVE & REED ST



VALLEY CIRCLE

One of the most dramatic floods in Mill Valley, and all of Marin, was in 1982. Days of incessant rain loosened the hillsides and a massive slide on the Waldo Grade impacted traffic flow to and from San Francisco. Five Marinites died, primarily from slide related incidents. Again, Locust and east fared the worst during that flood.

In late 2005, flooding occurred as a result of a storm on December 30th and 31st. Nearly twenty-five inches of rain fell that month, making it the wettest December in 50 years. A rain gauge at Corte Madera Creek, behind the Marin Theatre Company (397 Miller Avenue), measured a three-foot rise in the water between 8:00 and 10:00 p.m. There wasn't enough time to alert local residents to the potential flooding, and the city later reported almost two million dollars worth of storm related damage.

**CURRENT TECHNOLOGY ALLOWS
RESIDENTS AND BUSINESS OWNERS
TO RECEIVE TELEPHONE NOTIFICATION
OF FLOOD ALERTS FROM THE
CITY OF MILL VALLEY.**

Current technology allows residents and business owners to receive telephone notification of flood alerts from the City of Mill Valley. By early 2006, two hundred forty residents had signed up for these alerts. The surveyors who had to move to higher ground in 1889 had to rely on their own observations and wits to save their tents from rising water. Although flooding notification will be a vast improvement for some residents, flooding in Mill Valley is a reality that we will continue to live with.

—Joan Murray





DECEMBER 27, 1945

Charles Auguste Lauff

A Marin Pioneer and Witness to Mill Valley's Beginnings

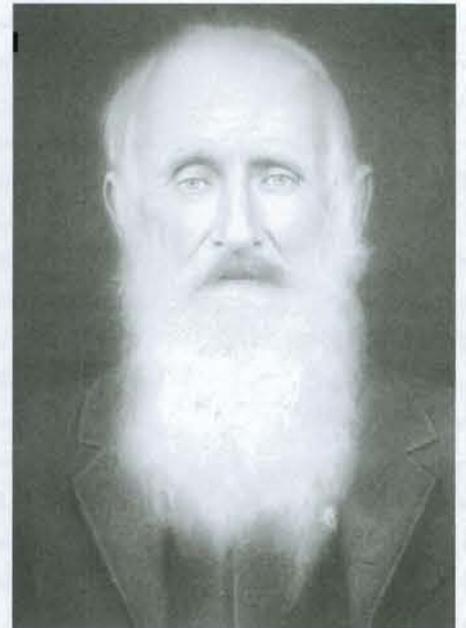
"The country around Mill Valley and Muir Woods was covered with immense trees and was the home of large black and brown bears. The elk were thick as bees on the flat in front of [where] Mill Valley [is located today] . . . The cattle were as plentiful as the elk and deer."

The early visitor who left such a vivid description of Mill Valley's teeming wildlife in 1844 was, curiously enough, a Frenchman from the northeastern province of Alsace. Charles Auguste Lauff was one of the adventuresome Europeans who ventured far away from home to the Pacific and to the little known shores of California in the first half of the 19th century. These early pioneers' lives were filled with both hardships and romance. Lauff certainly had his share of both.

This blond-bearded Alsatian who would, by 1915, become California's oldest surviving pioneer, was born in Strasbourg on February 22, 1822. He was Jacob and Caroline Ashelmann Lauff's youngest child. His father died while he was still an infant, leaving a comfortable estate. By the time Charles was ten years old, his mother took him to New York where they settled, probably close to relatives, and where the boy attended public school. He remembered going to fish in a rowboat around Staten Island.

His life of breathless adventure started at age 17 when he shipped before the mast on a bark bound for the coast of South America to hunt sea elephants for their oil. After 18 months of sailing, the *Byron* drifted through the straits of Magellan during a severe snowstorm and was wrecked. Lauff survived by clinging to a floating spar. Suffering after drifting for three days, exposed to the elements and without food or water, he was rescued and landed at Cape Horn. The intrepid young man immediately shipped-out again on another ship, this one bound for the whaling grounds of Sitka, Alaska.

That is how Lauff ended up sailing into San Francisco bay six months later, on October 13, 1844, at a time when the fledgling city still known as Yerba Buena consisted of only "eight adobe houses and the log cabin of the American consul. A few shacks were built down along the water's edge. The rest of the population was stationed at the Presidio." Forever astonished by California's teeming wildlife, Lauff noted as he walked back to his boat that the dunes along the beach "were lined



with thousands of sea birds. The bay was black with wild ducks and willows lined both sides of the sand dunes where there was running water." He discovered the same abundance of wildlife in Marin: "The whole country was alive with game and the streams were full of fish. Thousands of quail lined the trail. . . Lion and panther were numerous and wild cats and coyotes roamed the hills like jack rabbits on the prairie."

After living the hard life of a sailor for three long years, the young man now became engaged in the hide and tallow trade made famous in 1835 by Richard Henry Dana. In this new capacity Lauff made numerous trips along the coast and came to know a

number of old sailors who had deserted their ships, had taken up land here and there, and were making large fortunes hunting wild cattle and other animals for their skins. "The mountain in those days was swarming with wild animals, notwithstanding the fact that there were hunters living in the Bolinas country who were killing off elk, bear and lions for their hides. As we passed back into Tennessee Valley, the hillside was white with the bones of elk and deer and wild cattle that had been killed from time to time for their hides and the carcass left for the wild animals to feed upon." A number of Miwok natives and Californios were also engaged in the trade.

Lauff called quite regularly upon the local Marin grantees from whom he purchased "California banknotes" as hides were then nicknamed. He was very fond of William Richardson with whom he spent "many happy days" hunting. The Sausalito grantee was according to him "a dead shot and a great hand with the riata (lasso) and had several Indian cowboys who always accompanied him on his hunts." They hunted elk on what he called the Throckmorton ridge where he claimed elk remained until 1850; grizzlies in Steep Ravine, back of Mill Valley; deer, antelope, and elk at the "big lagoon... past where Manzanita station" (now a bus stop under the freeway) used to be.

By 1845 the enterprising young pioneer's sailing days came to an end when he chose to hire himself out to John Reed as a whipsawyer, cutting redwoods from Rancho Corte Madera with narrow, five to seven feet long ripsaws. "I was the first white man to work for John Reed Sr.," he reminisced, "Reed was a very kind and good man, and married to a Spanish lady... He was a fine specimen of manhood and she was the most beautiful bride I ever saw." Reed was at the

"I was the first white man to work for John Reed Sr., . . . Reed was a very kind and good man."

time engaged in building a large barn on his ranch. Lauff admired the young Irish settler who "owned an adobe house, hundreds of acres, and like Murphy had a number of squaws working for him."

The congenial lifestyle of these grantees very much impressed the young Alsatian, as did their rapport with local natives. San Rafael settler Timothy Murphy lived in a two story adobe house at today's intersection of Fourth and C Streets. "He was the king of the whole country as he employed a number of Indians and owned the land under some grant from the Spanish government. . . He was an expert with the lariat and was loved by all the Indians." Christmas dinners at Richardson's Sausalito adobe were unforgettable moments for the young man who delighted in the Californios' captivating code of etiquette. "They were as generous and open hearted as the song birds of the forest. Their happiness was your happiness, and anything they possessed was yours for the asking. Sociability and kindness went hand in hand."

The three "kings of the county" often gathered, and their native Indian laborers were always included in these celebrations: "John Reed was a great friend of Richardson at Sausalito and Murphy at San Rafael, and occasionally they would all meet at San Rafael and have a sort of barbecue and good time, in which the Indians would participate and engage in horse racing and lassoing wild cattle. It was the first real San Rafael Day, and occurred the first time in August 1842 [Charles reached Marin in 1844.]" There were always six or more native cowboys attending hunting

parties as well. They would beat the bushes, assist the hunters with their *riatas*, and haul the dead animals to trees to protect them from predators until they returned. Bands of local tribes would gather nearby so the game could be divided up with them. While hunting near Point Reyes, Lauff happened to wound an elk and was almost plowed by his horns: "An Indian killed him with an arrow and saved my life."

Keen as he was on the rancher's lifestyle, Charles Lauff was still possessed with the great thirst for adventure, which had brought him so far from his homeland in the first place. The turn of events in California provided all the excitement he could ever have wished for. He served in Fremont's army under Colonel Thomas McLane during the Mexican War, and upon his return spent six months panning for gold in Coloma in early 1848. He made a fortune piloting crafts on the San Joaquin River from San Francisco to Stockton in 1849, then dealt in timber from Bolinas. He worked as overseer for several Marin and Sonoma ranchers, and went on a prospecting tour with the Kelsey expedition in 1855.

At last, in 1857, he bought his own rancho near Olema. Not far away lived young Maria Sebrean who had been in love with the dashing Alsatian since she had first laid eyes on him in 1844 when she was only 12 years old. In 1862, Lauff married the local belle, just like Reed and Richardson had done. Like them too, he had many children. The resourceful blond-bearded Frenchman at last settled down on his 298 acre Bolinas ranch. He became a dairyman, and in his old age, a living California legend.

Claudine Chalmers was a resident of Mill Valley for thirty years. She is the author of "Early Mill Valley," from the Image of America series, published by Arcadia in 2005. She has written extensively on California's French pioneers (1848-1854).

SOURCES

History of Marin County, California, J. P. Munro-Fraser, Alley, Bowen & Co.: San Francisco, California, 1880.

Sketches of Early Days in California, a series of articles published in the *Independent*, a San Rafael newspaper, on January 18 and 25, and March 7 and 14, 1915.

An Early West Marin Romance, Joan Reutinger, *The Coastal Post*, November 1995.

Gus Costigan

More than a Builder

A.B. (Gus) Costigan was a man who left his mark on Mill Valley. You may not be familiar with his name, but you'll probably recognize the indelible imprint that he left on Mill Valley when you learn of the buildings, both businesses and residences, that he built or remodeled here. Advertised as the "the Costigan touch," this general contractor's distinctive style included the use of heavy redwood beams, used brick, and solid dutch doors.

One immediately recognizable work of his is the El Paseo complex that extends from Throckmorton Avenue to Sunnyside Avenue. Included in the original El Paseo project, the three-story building that is at 15 Throckmorton was once described as an eyesore. It's hard to imagine that it would ever have had that label. Owner Edna Foster, a community activist in her day, would leave meetings at the Outdoor Art Club and view the ramshackle three-story building across the street, and vowed to make some improvements.

Edna purchased the apartment house, and adjoining cottage that fronted on Sunnyside, in 1938, and began building and remodeling in 1940. Due to the labor shortages during the war, progress on the complex was slow. After Costigan's return from the European war front, they worked closely on El Paseo. That she admired his





work was obvious. A letter from 1955 to Edna Foster from the magazine, *Practical Builder*, confirmed the gift subscription that she had purchased for him. The building was completed in 1948 and its grand opening was an important event in town that year. Foster's vision for El Paseo would not have been complete without Costigan's craftsmanship and talent.

Although Gus Costigan was born in San Mateo, his grandfather was one of Mill Valley's first builders, having constructed the family home at 244 Corte Madera Avenue. The younger Costigan's family expected that he would become a physician, but Gus' interests developed in other directions. By the time he was eighteen years old, he had built his first home. He attended art and engineering schools, an unusual combination, but one that would later combine the aesthetic and mechanical talents apparent in his work. Later in his career, those talents would lead to the development of an interlocking cement block, which became widely used in the building trade.

By the time he [Gus Costigan] was eighteen years old, he had built his first home.

Costigan began building on Throckmorton, near Eugene Street, because his family owned property there. The family had foreseen the growth of Mill Valley as a result of the construction of the Golden Gate Bridge and purchased property.

Commercial remodeling projects included the former businesses on Throckmorton. See box below for list and location.

One other large commercial project was the Mill Valley Record office at 21 Corte Madera Avenue. It continued to be home to a newspaper (the Pacific Sun) until 2005, but there are no longer any obvious traces of the Costigan touch there. A Mill Valley Record writer described his style as, "Old English." At 21 Corte Madera, he had included an interior brick wishing well.

THROCKMORTON PROJECTS

Commercial remodeling projects included the former businesses on Throckmorton:

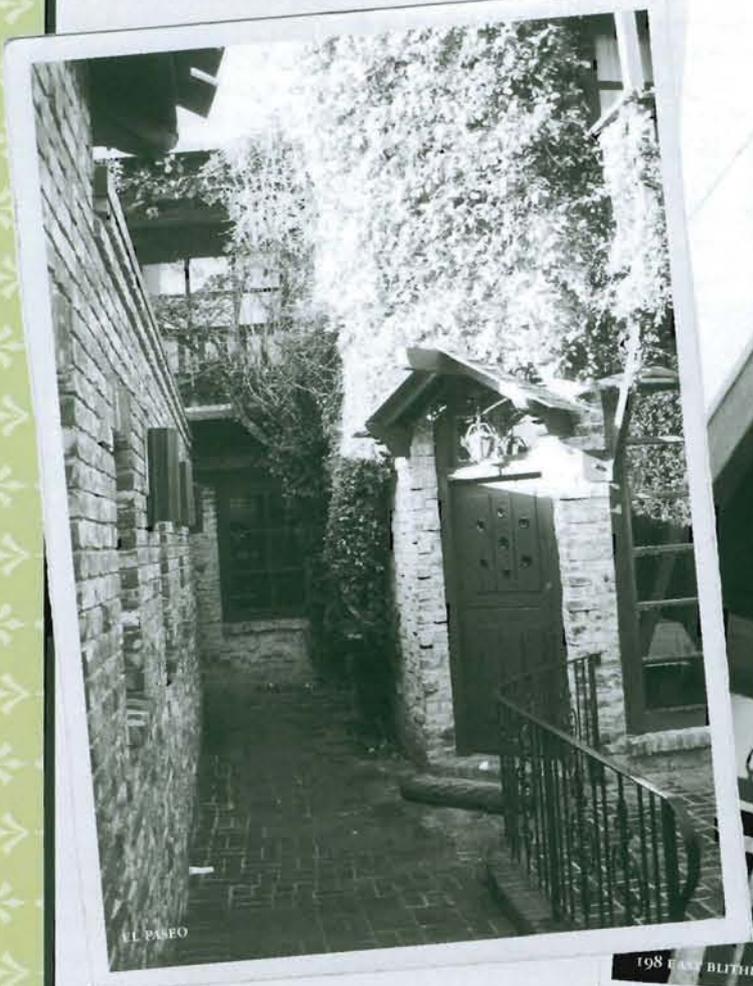
- 57 Throckmorton—Varney's Hardware/*Wilkes Sport*
- 68 Throckmorton—Rutherford's Pharmacy/*Cavallo*
- 70 Throckmorton—Dr. Paul Rice, Optometrist/*Michael Quinn Opticians*
- 74 Throckmorton—Le Cirque/*The Pleasure Principle*
- 127 Throckmorton—Bell's Clock Shop/*addition to La Ginestra Restaurant*



Although Costigan built new homes and new businesses, in addition to his commercial remodels, he also worked on residential additions. In 1958, he bid on a project to build an in-law apartment for Jim and Pat Stephenson, at what was then 205 Miller Avenue. A photo taken in the driveway during his work there shows all three Stephenson children playing in the sand piled up in the back of his shiny clean pickup truck. When the project was completed, Gus' expenses came in under his estimate. He was proud to complete the job for less than anticipated, and he provided a refund to the homeowner for the difference!

Pat Stephenson also recalls that Costigan spoke of being influenced by the architecture in Italy that he was introduced to during World War II. We know that he served as a Corporal in the U.S. Army there, since a Mill Valley Record article from early 1945 refers to a letter that he wrote to Mill Valley friends about the shocking prices of goods on the Italian black market.

He was proud to complete the job for less than anticipated, and he provided a refund to the homeowner for the difference!



Costigan's eye for detail was unusual for local contractors during the time that he was building in Marin, and it might include a rustic mailbox or carport to match the Craftsman-like details of the home. A lovely birdhouse, which still remains at 206 East Blithedale, was a touch added just under the eaves. Although you'll find a home he built for himself and his wife on Lagunitas Avenue in Ross, and a house at 170 Palm Drive in San Rafael, he built primarily in Mill Valley. He also worked on such mundane projects as the Marin County Department of Health, which was how El Paseo owner Edna Foster met him.

Little is known of what became of Gus Costigan, yet his work remains an integral part of Mill Valley with its unique village design.

—Joan Murray



ADDITIONAL COSTIGAN PROJECTS

More of Costigan's work can be seen at:

206 East Blithedale—Cagwin, Seymour and Hamilton
Note the eaves to the entry, which are unmistakably Costigan.

63, 224, and 310 Cascade

40 Molino and 16 Janes

240 Manor and 12 Fairway



300 East Blithedale

Mill Valley's Local Telephone Office and How it Came to Be Built

The No. 5 crossbar, what would become the most widely used telephone switching equipment in its time, "cut over" on December 9, 1949 at the Pacific Telephone & Telegraph Company (PT&T) office at 300 East Blithedale Avenue. It was just the second installation of its type in the country. Today, connectivity to telephone lines is mostly digital, but in 1949 the impulses received from numbers dialed from Mill Valley, were routed over lines through the No. 5 crossbar. It represented the best that telephone equipment could provide.

However, before telephone equipment, new number assignments, repair, and operator services were provided at 300 East Blithedale, there was a tenuous process between telephone company architects, the Mill Valley Planning Commission and the City Council. The original plans called for the building to face Walnut Avenue, and the primary vehicular access to be on East Blithedale.

This was a departure from the zoning that was in place at the time, with homes, a school, and a park being close to the proposed commercial building. In 1947, commercial zoning ended at Sycamore and East Blithedale, and the potential increased traffic due to the activities there was a primary concern. There was some neighborhood opposition, although an editorial from the Mill Valley Record encouraged residents not to be apathetic about the proposed project.

The \$800,000 cost of the project was significant, and the potential loss of taxes was not desirable to the city. Initial plans called for a one-story, stucco building, but a photograph from the newspaper displays a modern, flat-roofed, two-story building. Local visionary and planning commissioner,

Vera Schultz, was adamant in retaining the "English type of architecture in keeping with the tone of the city." She was also opposed to "spot zoning," the term that was used for approval of the variance.

Planning commissioners would not approve public business services to be conducted at the building, and no trucks were to be permanently stored there. As a result, telephone company business offices continued their operation at 130 Throckmorton. With the appropriate design restrictions in place, the city approved the modified plans; the process to obtain planning approval took three months.

At the time of the building's construction, the telephone company was attempting to respond to unprecedented growth. In 1949, there were 3700 telephones in Mill Valley, which represented a dramatic increase from the 2795 telephones in usage at the end of World War II. When two open houses were held at the new building in April 1949, over 700 people attended.

Operator Services

Although the No. 5 crossbar represented the latest available in telephone equipment, it was only one component of the services performed there. Three shifts of operators answered calls from Mill Valley telephones 24 hours a day, although they also serviced Tennessee Valley, which was referred to as "the coast." Retired operator, Sally Crawley Hearn of Mill Valley said, "If you lived in Mill Valley, you got a Mill Valley girl, if you lived in Sausalito, you got a Sausalito girl. Today you are probably talking to someone in India."



Sally worked the graveyard shift, but was comfortable working late hours since a security guard was always present. A recent conversation with

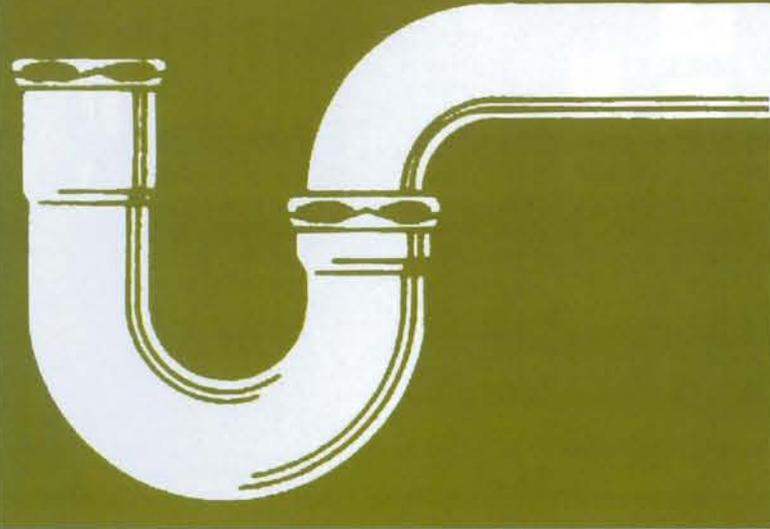
Sally and Elinor Martinez Feeney, who also worked at "300 East," provided two former operators' points of view. Both Sally and Elinor were raised in Mill Valley and after graduating from Tamalpais High School worked for PT&T for thirty-three years before retiring. Both of them said that it was a good time to work for PT&T in their hometown. And, that customers knew that when an operator responded with, "Number, please" that she was there to help. They recounted that during the Cuban Missile Crisis that guards were assigned to the building around the clock, which symbolized an end to an age of small town innocence.

Operators answered calls in Mill Valley until 1974, when the building moved into a different phase of service. It still provides the connectivity required for local telephones, but as we move into cellular technology, who knows how long 300 East Blithedale will provide this current service? For now, it blends well into the community with its wood and stone facing, a remnant of thoughtful planning of over sixty years ago. —Joan Murray



BUILDING — TIM AMYX

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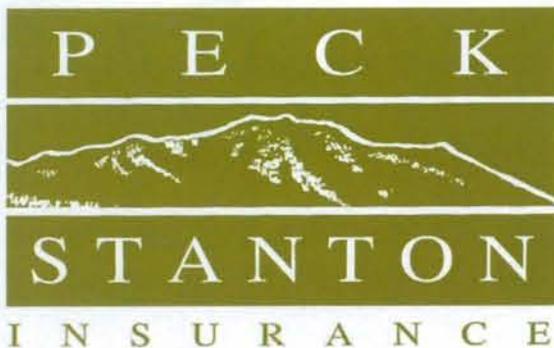
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