

A BRIEF HISTORY OF PEACOCK GAP

PART I: THE SETTLERS

The 140-acre site on which Peacock Gap Golf and Country Club is situated was a mixture of meadow, marshland and tidal flats when the first white settlers, the McNears, came to this area in 1868. For several thousand years before that time, the Miwoks (literally "the people") hunted and gathered acorns in the thickly forested hills encircling the valley and fished and dug for clams in the waters off Point San Pedro. They must have been prodigious clam diggers: The old McNear mansion in Glenwood was built on one of several giant shell mounds scattered throughout the area. Another mound is located on the golf course, between the third green and fourth tee.

Like most areas of southern Marin, the hills of Point San Pedro were once covered with virgin stands of oak, redwood, and other native California trees. Most of the first-growth trees vanished in the mid-19th century, when natives were put to work stripping their former hunting grounds for timber to build San Francisco. Not surprisingly, the natives vanished shortly thereafter.

After the opening of the Southern Pacific-Union Pacific transcontinental railroad in 1869 the Chinese laborers who built the western portion of the line found they were no longer needed or welcome in San Francisco. Large numbers of emigrants from the city moved to Point San Pedro and set up a fishing village and trading post served by junks plying back and forth across the bay. The netting and drying of bay shrimp became a thriving industry in the 1870s and continued off and on until the shrimp beds played out in the 1950s. At the fishery's peak in the 1920s, China Camp fishermen netted nearly a ton of shrimp a day.

New Englanders John A. and George W. McNear bought the Point San Pedro land grant of a retired sea captain named Bullis in 1869 and subsequently added to those landholdings until they owned roughly 3,000 contiguous acres and five linear miles of shoreline stretching from "Chicken Point" immediately south and east of modern Glenwood, all the way through the present China Camp State Park. John McNear, who appears to have bought out his brother George, or exchanged part of his landholdings in Petaluma for all rights to the bay-front property, dreamed of creating a major rail and marine hub at Point San Pedro linking Santa Rosa, Petaluma, Ross, San Rafael, and San Francisco. Even though that plan didn't pan out, the McNears managed very well on the income from their brickyard, quarry, dairy, fishing, beach resort, and other business interests. John McNear and his son Erskine built the original San Pedro Road along the shoreline, using rock and gravel from their quarry to fill in the low spots. Shortly after the roadway was completed, they sold it to the county for a fraction of its cost. Other reminders of the McNear legacy survive in McNear Brick Yard; remnants of the old brick cow barn at the end

of Biscayne Drive (reconstituted in the late 1980s as a nest of swank townhouses); the handsome Erskine McNear mansion on Knight Drive (which served for many years as the Glenwood Community Center); and, of course, McNear's Beach, which was sold to a private developer in 1959 and acquired by the county as a public park in 1970.

Nancy Menary, great-granddaughter of John A. McNear, wife of the late Judge David Menary Jr., and mother of Dave (Big Wave) Menary III, is one of the original members of Peacock Gap Golf and Country Club.

PART II: THE LEGEND OF MARIN BAY

In 1955 the McNear family sold its extensive landholdings on San Pedro Point—all but the quarry, brickworks, and beach resort—to real estate developer John Stegge of Vallejo. Stegge immediately carved out a 100-acre parcel for a new subdivision, the future Glenwood, and sold the remaining 2100 acres to Hawaiian financier Chinn Ho's Latpac ("Capital" spelled backwards) Corporation for what he had paid for the original parcel. Lou Perini's powerhouse Perini Land and Investment Company (best known, locally, as the developer of the San Francisco Golden Gateway project) joined in the Latpac venture in 1959.

The Latpac-Perini partnership's plan for developing the spectacularly beautiful five-mile-long tract of shoreline, meadows, and oak-studded hills called for the creation of a recreational-residential complex comprising several thousand homes and apartments, a resort hotel, beaches and parks, a tennis club, deep water marinas, schools, shopping centers, and a trophy golf course and club house. They called it Mission Bay.

The developers selected Point San Pedro's South Valley with "six hundred acres of immediately usable land" as the centerpiece for the Marin Bay venture—a subdivision of several hundred mid- to upper range homes clustered around a handsome 18-hole golf course. Work on the project progressed with what today's EIR-bound city planners would consider unseemly haste. A master plan for the subdivision sailed through the San Rafael City Council in 1958. By the following spring, course architect William Bell had laid out the 6,011 yard, par 71 course (73 for women) and earthmovers under the supervision of construction boss (later general manager) Terry Van Gorder were hard at work converting the site's sub-sea level flood plain into a western variation on the traditional seaside "links" course. In the spring of 1960, about the time workers finished seeding the greens and fairways, manager-promoter Ed Lee boasted to the press that the course would be ready for play by September. It was—barely.

The 10,000 square foot clubhouse, completed early the following year, was designed by San Francisco's Bay Group Associates as a "complete social center for adults and young people" with provision for a swimming pool (never built), tennis court, meeting rooms, dining facilities, and a few studio apartments for visiting executives and their guests. The first 200 residential lots in the new Peacock Gap subdivision went on sale soon after the course opened.

By 1963 Latipac/Perini had dropped its grandiose plans for Marin Bay. In that year San Francisco developer Jerome Draper bought about half of the 2100 acre plot—including golf course, clubhouse, subdivision improvements, and 247 ready-to-build lots—plus an option on the remaining 1,000 acres of undeveloped land, for roughly \$4 million. Along with its new owner, Marin Bay acquired a new name, Peacock Gap.

Next time you stroll down the ninth fairway, look up into the hills due north of the maintenance shed, and you will see a well-worn trail winding down from the lowest cleft in the ridge all the way to the base of Biscayne Drive. That's the Gap. In the old days the trail bisected grazing lands leased from the McNears by a dairyman named Thomas Peacock—hence, Peacock Gap. So now we know the derivation of "Peacock Gap." But why Draper chose this obscure landmark as the name for its new development is open to conjecture. We're inclined to believe the "Peacock" moniker was conceived by wheeler-dealer Ed Lee—who doubtless thought it gave the place a touch of class. To go along with the theme, Lee imported an aviary of peacocks and peahens and set them loose to strut about the development, leaving their little calling cards on neighborhood lawns and raising the rafters with their piercing cries. Homeowners quickly put a stop to this nonsense. However, the name stuck.

Nineteen sixty-five was a temporary high water mark for Draper and Peacock Gap. By then the burgeoning residential development boasted 290 homes and 50 condo units. Four bedroom homes on Riviera Drive, right on the golf course, were selling for around \$55,000 and brand new two- to four-bedroom condo units in The Knolls ranged from \$37, 800 to \$49,000.

In that year the City of San Rafael imposed a moratorium on new construction in the area, pending financing and construction of major sewage treatment and deep-water effluent discharge systems improvements. This ill-timed setback just about did it for the thinly financed Draper organization and for Chinn Ho's glorious dream of building a modern Xanadu at Point San Pedro. By the time the moratorium was lifted in 1971, Draper had declared bankruptcy, the golf course and remaining unsold lots had been reacquired in foreclosure by Chinn Ho's Sixty Trust, and two major segments of the fabled Marin Bay development, McNear's Beach and that gorgeous stretch of coastline now known as China Camp State Park had been permanently deeded to the public.

At that point, Peacock Gap the Golf Club and Peacock Gap the Real Estate Development parted company. In 1973 Chinn Ho sold the club to Nitto America Corporation, a golf course development and management company headquartered in Los Angeles. And thus began a new chapter in the history of The Gap.

PART III: GOLFING AT THE GAP

Parts I and II of this series focused on the early history of the South Valley of Point San Pedro, now known as Peacock Gap, and the people who settled and developed

it. Now for the fun part: In this final chapter we will spotlight some of the special characters and events enshrined in our collective memory of golfing at The Gap.

Let's warm up with a few trivia questions:

Q. Peacock Gap golf course architect William Bell and chief engineer Terry Van Gorder pioneered a design concept that is still rare if not unique in the annals of golf architecture. What was it?

A. Peacock Gap's signature "double-whammy" hazards: fairway bunkers guarded by overhanging trees. You'll find examples on holes 4, 5, 8, 9 (2), 11, 12, 14, and 17—nine in total, which happens to be a world record for hazards of this kind.

Q. Who owns the official course record at Peacock Gap?

A. Ray Floyd. His 63, recorded in 1965, was shot from the white tees—then as now, 6001 yards, par 71. In the early 1980s, blue tees were added and the course was lengthened to 6354 yards. This was done by moving the 1st and 14th tees up the hill toward the clubhouse, building a new elevated tee for the par three 7th hole, and lengthening the tee boxes at several other holes, notably numbers 3, 12, 13, 15, and 18. Despite the added length, Floyd's 63 is still recognized as the official record.

Q. Who among our current staff has worked at Peacock Gap the longest?

A. Though he is no longer an employee, teaching pro Al Hand has been around The Gap longer than—well, practically longer than God. Al literally grew up here during the 1960s, playing golf and working on the range and in the pro shop while going to school. He served as head pro from 1975 to 1990 and has been a teaching pro here ever since. Dorothy Anderson came to work at the Club for the first time in 1975, the same year Al made head pro, and has held several different catering and front office positions since. Also high on the list of long-time Gappers, John Henry has been pulling gigs behind the bar at PGG&CC since 1988, and we would be surprised if he can't rattle off the name and personal history of every member he ever served.

With his flying pickup and flop-eared co-pilot, Kipper, Richard Lavine is another familiar presence around Peacock Gap. Richard has been head greens-keeper since 1985, and those of us who remember what the course was like before he took the job have reason to celebrate the employment anniversary of this exceptionally savvy, dedicated, and hard working course superintendent.

Q. Who is the senior active member of the club in continuous years of membership?

A. Near as we can figure, Frank and Marge Manko, who joined Peacock Gap in 1970, are the longest-standing family members. Jack Sterley, Class of '68, may or may not be the club's senior male member, but he is surely the oldest ex-club champ who can still shoot his age. Olga Rees and her husband Alan joined in 1966. Since Alan's death, Olga has remained a member, making her not only the senior woman member, but possibly the overall seniority champ as well—barring Nancy Menary and family who, along with other McNear heirs were literally "grandfathered" into the club from the very beginning. Anyway, these are our candidates for OM's, and if anyone wishes to dispute the claim, let's hear from you.

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The thing old timers remember best about the Peacock Gap Golf and Country Club of the 1960s and '70s is its exuberant social life. In the early 1960s the Draper organization promoted the new development's lively and luxurious life style by sponsoring such splashy affairs as the Annual Marin Debutante Ball, the Peacock Gap Concours d'Elegance, and a Bing Crosby/Bob Hope Celebrity Golf Tournament. Other major attractions included a doubles exhibition match, played on the Club's one and only tennis court, featuring Rod Laver, Ken Rosewald, Poncho Gonzales, and Butch Bucholtz (what a spectacular performance that was!); an aquacade and Fourth of July fireworks display at McNear's Beach; sailboat races on Peacock Gap Lagoon (they were, as you might expect, very small sailboats), and a reception fund-raiser for Republican Presidential Nominee Nelson Rockefeller that drew 5000 guests—the largest party ever catered at Peacock Gap.

In the '60s and '70s, the majority of the club's members were neighbors, fellow Peacock Gap home-owners, mostly couples in their thirties and forties. They liked to party, and Peacock Gap was their playground. The Club's upstairs dining room was open to the public for lunch and dinner five days a week, and the food, especially the Sunday evening buffet, was good enough to draw patrons from all over Southern Marin. Men's Section tournaments, which attracted as many as eighty or ninety players each month, began with a hot sit-down breakfast. Only an anti-social "grind" would skip it to warm up on the range.

One Sunday afternoon a month fifteen or twenty couples would gather for a mixed four-ball tournament, followed by dinner at the Club, followed by Lord knows what else. It was a lively crowd.

We men had just one member-guest Invitational Tournament each year, but it was generally a sell-out, with double shotgun starts on the longer holes, tons of expensive prizes, and, to cap it all off, a grand dinner dance for our guests and their ladies. In honor of the occasion, some of us stayed up past 10—that's 10 p.m.!

One of this old timer's favorite Peacock Gap memories is of the annual two-man better ball match play tournament named after long-time MS tournament director Bill Rambo. The Rambo Memorial was the climax of the Men's Section's golfing season. To win it, a team had to survive a stroke-play qualifying round and four gut-twisting, white knuckle, deep-gag matches against evenly matched and/or properly handicapped opponents. (These were the teams we beat. The teams that beat us were a bunch of sandbaggers who had never turned in a legitimate golf score in their lives.)

On the night before the tournament, contestants gathered for the big CALCUTTA dinner—a modern version of a slave auction in which players and non-players alike were free to bid on any team, or as many teams, as they wished. The high bidder for each team won its share, if any, of the Calcutta pool, which typically ran well over a thousand dollars. In Calcutta bidding the trick was to know when to stop. Each team, presumably, wanted to own itself, and to buy itself as cheaply as possible. Plied with drink and egged on by our wily auctioneers, Bill Breen and Will Johnston, the rest of us did our best to ratchet the bidding as high as

possible without actually "winning" the auction. Inevitably, one or two of the bolder bidders would get carried away and end up owning three or four teams. The next morning you could spot the big spenders of the previous evening scurrying around the clubhouse frantically trying to lay off bets before their wives found out they had absconded with the egg money.

In the thirty years since its sale to Nitto America Corporation, PGG&CC has evolved from a semi-private country club and neighborhood watering hole into a professionally managed, for-profit golf and catering facility. The most visible manifestation of this change took shape in 1987, when the entire upper floor of the clubhouse, including the former member's bar, was cleared of all vestiges of golf and golfers and transformed into a modern, semi-detached catering center. At the same time, the main floor was redesigned to accommodate a spacious new dining room serving club members and the golfing public alike. Most old timers would probably agree the remodeling was a good thing, with the added attractiveness and accessibility of the new 19th Hole more than offsetting the loss of whatever "exclusivity" a members-only bar conferred. Still, we can't help missing the old club's clubby atmosphere--those big round tables where we would gather for an hour or so after our rounds, having lunch, playing Liar's Dice, laughing at awful jokes, and sobbing into our dry martinis over the putts that got away.

Well then, enough. Here's to history—and to tomorrow; to the ghosts of fondly remembered friends and the joy of making new ones; to all those rounds we played together, some forever fixed in our memory, some mercifully forgotten; to the endless fascination of The Game and the undying faith that the next round will be better.

To the Gap!

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